





# **Short Stories for Tall Tourists**

By Rafael Claver Fos



[www.editorialblablabla.com](http://www.editorialblablabla.com)

Translator: Kate Good

Editor: Adrienne Erazo

Cover design: Kathrin Silber

Cover photograph: Ulises Pistolo Eliza

Text layout: Francesc Andrés

Cover model: Matthew Hounsoume

# CONTENTS

- 7. The Declaration of Independence
- 13. Moksha (or the End of the Cycle of Reincarnation)
- 17. Life and Debt
- 23. Grand Larceny
- 29. Tag
- 35. The Sweetest Little Fellow
- 41. R.I.P.
- 45. How Funny!
- 49. Olympic Spirit
- 53. Emotional Triangles
- 59. Royal Vocation



## **The Declaration of Independence**

Everything started at a protest. Accompanied by his entire family and a few hundred fellow countrymen, the farmer had come down to the city to reclaim the rights of his unrecognized nation. Brandishing a flag with nine stripes, he joined the masses, shouting his head off: IN-DE-PEN-DENCE! The clamor was deafening and the windows of the metropolitan buildings rattled with these steps in History.

After a long battle, there was a referendum. And, since it could not be any other way, they won secession. The avenues filled with garlands, and speeches that animated the crowds were delivered on the balconies of city halls.

A few months out, though, the first symptoms of inconformity in the emerging state manifested themselves. The northern region—the mountainous one—demanded certain preferential treatment in the creation of the new constitution. According to the representatives from this region, given the new geopolitical restructuration, they would be the productive motor of the country from now on since they had always been surplus producers in all sectors.

It was logical, then, that they be granted certain privileges in different areas, above all in fiscal matters.

On the other hand, in the city, among the ruling classes, those demands were considered to be poorly suited to their needs and they labeled the northern inhabitants uncharitable and selfish. The media in the new capital turned public opinion against the northern neighbors and soon they carried out a smear campaign. The citizens of the mountainous region felt morally and economically attacked, and they decided to travel to the city to express their discontent. But, the most reactionary leaders from the big city prohibited their protest with tight fists. At the rally, the police slapped around a few elderly folks and whacked a handful of adolescents with their batons.

Inclined to avenge such an insult, all of the political and social troops from the north united, wrote a manifesto, and organized a mass protest in the new capital. Vehicles, buses, and trains crossed the country north to south en masse. In one of the train cars, the farmer was traveling with a good number of his extended family and a great cohort of his countrymen. Brandishing a flag with nine stripes and a star, he joined the masses, shouting his head off: IN-DE-PEN-DENCE! Tensions rose, the crowd went mad, and a dozen or so shop windows were shattered.

In this case, however, the new battle for the nation did not last very long. Because the constitution had not even been fully drafted, it was only necessary to work through the loopholes in the legal corpus to outline a new set of laws. Furthermore,



since the young country was prone to referendums, having another take place would hardly be noticeable.

The separatist vote won again with a convincing victory and a new state was formed in the mountainous region—a beautiful nation that immediately prospered. Sundry factors contributed to its success, like its natural riches—which attracted tourism—, the privileged geographical location—which benefitted commerce—, and the tax policies—which turned it into a fiscal paradise.

Everything rolled along smoothly for a couple of years, but the nation's status as a tax haven stirred up strong international pressure against it. Privatized education and healthcare was of no help either; these measures rebounded and provoked the impoverishment of the middle class. On the other hand, the well-to-do sectors, who by not paying taxes had accumulated mass amounts of capital, reveled in their own abundant wealth. Because of the widening social gap, the government was compelled to intercede to avoid a war of the classes. As is customary, they went about this poorly. They limited themselves to steep austerity measures and, once again, all of this occasioned protests and commotion. Three of the five valleys of the mountainous region—concretely, those who had reputations as populists—joined forces and prepared a march on the old capital of the province—which was now the capital of the state. A throng of malcontents wandered through the streets holding up banners and posters opposing the budget cuts. Among them, the farmer, who brandished a flag with nine stripes, a star, and a tower. Since he had lost

his voice that day, instead of screaming, he blew a vuvuzela.

That vindictory parade made waves in the media and its success energized the organizers. The representatives from each of the three valleys agreed to meet periodically in order to lay down a plan that allowed them a gradual transition to self-governance in their regions. The encounters were marked by specific sessions, required by protocol, where they discussed various matters with great efficiency. Naturally, it was inevitable that certain discrepancies emerged in the basic guidelines of the project for independence. And, ultimately, every valley decided to go its own way and establish its own representative body. In this way, they skipped ahead several chapters on the road to individual liberty and the secessionist factions attained their autonomy.

Independence day was celebrated in the village square. They improvised tables with wooden sawhorses and planks. A flag with nine stripes, a star, a tower, and a half moon presided over the banquet; it flapped in the wind on the main balcony of the chaplain's house. The food was abundant and the people gorged themselves, but when time for dessert came, a heated argument broke out over landmarks and hunting rights. The farmer scolded his countrymen and abandoned the plaza, irate, accompanied by his closest relatives. On a day of such great import, the community considered his reaction to be the worst possible of insults, and they would never pardon the offense. The farmer saw himself doomed to a life of social ostracism. Isolated in his own agricultural domain, he definitively dedicated himself to the production

of an autocratic economy. Since he had all of his provisions at home, he had no need to leave his property. In this way, with the full support of his family behind him, he focused on farming and animal husbandry, and thanks to his inherited knowledge of the countryside, he managed to keep moving forward.

One night while they were roasting chestnuts in the warmth of the fireplace, the farmer told his wife and his children what he had been considering for the past several months: he wanted to claim his own nationality for the family and declare their land as an independent kingdom. It was not a particularly crazy idea. They had 53 hectares, which is to say 0.53 square kilometers; a territorial expanse that would make them a country bigger than the Vatican. The farmer thought that argument would convince his wife, who had firm religious convictions; but instead, she was offended. The following day, she, with the children, abandoned the farm.

Confined on his lands, the farmer found what people call peace in solitude. Once freed from external interferences, he took up an existence full of small pleasures and he began to devote himself to constructing the symbols of his emerging state. Designing the flag alone gave him many headaches. The farmer found that all of the banners around the world were the same: stripes, stars, moons, suns, and some planet. He wanted to innovate and concluded that the most appropriate, according to his character, was a white flag with meteorite shooting across. He drew the space rock with charcoal over a white cloth. He attached a reed and planted it at the entrance of the farm.

Seated on the terrace, the farmer holds a cup in his left hand and takes a few sips of wine from his first vintage. He proudly observes the borders of his territory. It's a small state, true, but it has the lowest per capita delinquency rate and the highest in bovine and pork livestock. For that reason he knows that sooner or later foreign nations will establish their first contacts in order to buy his surplus ham and cheese. At the moment, he is in no rush. He still has to draw up a pile of documents that allow him to standardize these new commercial treatises. The problem, however, is that starting a few weeks back, his right hand started to reject his commands. It is hard to explain; the fingers do their own thing and have begun to lightly shift back and forth. Last Sunday, when he went to milk a cow, his right hand revolted, twisted his wrist, and gave him the middle finger.

## **Moksha** **(or the End of the Cycle of Reincarnation)**

Pop out your head. Breathe. Let out a cry. Wail. Do not open your eyes; they still have to adjust to the light. Suck. Listen. Repeat what you hear. Swallow only what they put in your mouth. Crawl. Stand up. Walk. Point at things. Play with whatever they give you. Chase balls. If they hurt you, cry. If they come back, give it to them. Play more, much more. Make up games. Play with the others and, if you can, mostly just play doctor. Read aloud. Write syllables. Hold on tight to the handlebars and pedal. Do not ask who the man in the red hat is and accept the gifts. Take the training wheels off the bike. Maintain your balance. Ask for an allowance on Sundays. Save up. Break the piggy bank. Buy yourself a videogame. Order a new computer. Wait for her when classes are over. Tell her you love her. At a minimum, kiss her cheek. Own the street. Build a fort in the woods. Throw eggs at your neighbor's house. Break the windows of abandoned cars. Enter the church halfway through Mass. Take the Eucharist four times a day. Set off fireworks in the

confessionals. Defend your innocence. Sign up for the school team. Do not overexert yourself at practice. During the game, leave it all on the field. Celebrate your victories with isotonic beverages. Slip on brand name sports shoes. Do not pop your zits. Give away your toys. Hang a poster at the head of the bed. Get a drum set. Let your hair grow. Shave. Put on some jeans. Take your mom's credit card. Buy expensive sunglasses. Nick your dad's gin. Refill the bottle with water. Drink prudently, but let the girls get drunk. Make out with them. Tell your friends about it. Exaggerate. Throw parties when your parents go on vacation. Fill the bathtub with beer. Get wasted. Pass out. Wake up with the taste of bile in your mouth. Clean up the vomit with bleach and Lysol. Look for an apartment in the city. Pick the biggest room. Find a note-taker with good handwriting. Pass your exams however you can. If necessary, cheat. Get free passes for the club. Wait for her at the bathroom exit. Take her home and let her do whatever she wants with you. Do not spoil it. Fall in love. Have fun. Come back down to earth. Suffer. Write an emotional poem. Toughen up. Try to forget. Backpack around exotic countries. Take off your shoes. Leave your coins and belt in the bin. Pass through the metal detector. Take photos. Do not post all of them on Facebook. Look for influential people. Find the right job. Suck up to your superior. Wait for her outside the office. Show her the ring. Give her a kiss on the lips, tenderly. Negotiate the mortgage. Read the fine print. Sign it. Let her pick the towels. Take the side of the bed closest to the bathroom. Reach a truce with the in-laws. Do not upset your

mother-in-law. Look at the pink lines. Rest your ear on her belly and listen to it move. Get excited. Change his diapers. Do not cringe. Dress up with a white beard and a red jacket. Make sure he does not recognize you. Give him an allowance on Sundays. Do not scold him for the marks on the wall left by the tacks of his posters in the mortgaged home. Buy him a good moped. Tell him not to drink too much. Celebrate your anniversaries with her. Travel to an all-inclusive luxury hotel. Take off your shoes. Leave your coins and belt in the bin. Pass through the metal detector. Let her take the pictures. Take the time to re-read the classics. Do not come home from the trip early, unannounced. Do not neglect your belly so much. Do a little exercise; ride a bike, for example. Do not try to hide your baldness. Change the mattress. Invest in a good box spring. Discover preventative medicine. Cut back your hours at work. Hire a massage therapist. Get better medical coverage. Get life insurance. Congratulate your daughter-in-law when they give you the news. Hug her. Be excited for them and for you. Pay for the baptism. Buy a good recliner and a bigger television. Distract yourself with twenty-two high-definition figurines chasing a ball. Try to share the remote control. Learn to enjoy your free time. Discover D-I-Y projects, Sudoku, and stamp collecting. Master the subtlety of bonsais. Write your memoir. Participate in organized outings on the occasional afternoon, to nearby places, and only by bus. Do not complain so much about the chest pain. Reduce your consumption of fatty foods. Eliminate salt. Draft your will. Be patient. Learn the art of waiting. Ask for sedatives and analgesics. Try to

transcend the pain that gnaws at you from within. Hold her fingers when they wrap around yours. Notice how her lips kiss your knuckles. Notice how a tear falls down the back of your hand. Maintain a tiny smile and your convictions until the last moment. Do not let the chaplain come in. Use your last words to give thanks and dictate an exemplary epitaph. Relax. Let it be. Let them be. Let yourself go, little by little, and at peace with your spirit...

Open your eyes. But do not look at the brightness that shines at the very end. Do not worry, either, about the shadows passing by and hastening towards the blinding light. Turn in the opposite direction, towards the darkness. Wait for your eyes to adjust to the blackness. Look up. Look at the specks of light glimmering above you, towards a vanishing point: they indicate the emergency exits. By law, all tunnels have one every sixty-five meters. Make your way towards the first. Stand below the light. Feel around the wall and you will find a door. Feel around the surface and you will bump into a horizontal bar at waist-height. Hold the bar down and push the door. Enter. Starting now, you go alone.



## Life and Debt

He was born at the tip of a pen. The ink glided across the document and, with curly flourish, it formed a name with seventeen letters: Mary Margaret Smith. The anthroponym made reference to his mother; the baby, though, was called Variable Interest Credit— “Debt” to his friends.

The birth certificate of Debt was inserted in a hefty collection of papers drafted in fine print. As for his history, it was compiled over the years in six voluminous tomes which kept stacking up in the archives of the Central Bank. Now, if we split hairs, only three sentences are needed to summarize the existence of Variable Interest Credit:

The variable should be regulated by the passage of time. But, the interest of the bank always lies in simply recuperating the multiplied amount of the loan. In that way, Time—with her usual swiftness—worked against Mary Margaret Smith, and the whole family was discredited by their eviction.

A judicial representative, accompanied by a locksmith and police patrol, put the family out by force. The human shield organized by a group of people linked to the Association

for Equal Housing Rights served for naught. The judicial representative stuck an order to the door, the locksmith broke open the lock, and the police dealt out four shouts, two shoves, and a smack.

As soon as they pulled her out of the apartment, Mary Margaret Smith lost her spirit. Grasping her husband, she collapsed. The couple broke into tears, crouched down together on the landing of the stairwell. They were so desperate that neither of the two noticed that their baby—for whom they had suffered such dire financial straights—left the house by himself, went down the stairs, and headed off to visit Grandma.

Debt arrived at Grandma's house that same afternoon. Mary Margaret Smith's mother was the guarantor of the loan, and since her daughter had not complied with the terms of payment, now the responsibility fell on the little old lady. Another human chain, wrapped around the building, organized by a group of people involved with the Movement of Mortgage Victims, accomplished nothing. The police forces broke the links of the chain with four strategic whacks of the truncheon and they slid through. They carried out the old woman, lifting her up from the armpits. The grandmother lost consciousness because of the hullabaloo and did not notice how her grandson sent her off with a kiss on each cheek before darting out to the plaza.

Without a roof over his head, Debt spent a few days wandering the streets. The residents of the village, who always saw him begging around, felt compassion for the

child and took him into their homes. At first it seemed like the newcomer was a good boy who would fill homes with joy and fortune, but soon Debt made a friend who would become a plague for everyone in the long run: Procedural Law. The two boys spent the mornings in the court square playing RIFs, bankruptcy proceedings, and public auctions. Just like that, without even realizing, all the neighbors were suddenly on the dole and sleeping in the streets.

That provoked some unheard of consequences. Without work or property, the citizens found themselves free of most of their tax obligations and they abruptly stopped payments. The treasury members at City Hall resented this lack of income and could not cover the cost of basic expenses, like water and electricity. Facing this extreme situation, an extra plenary session was called, and Debt was invited. The town councilors slashed the budgets of their respective departments, yet they concluded that no one could make their numbers. That is to say, the tax revenues had been so trivial that they had to suspend ipso facto the monthly wages of all of the civil servants. Additionally, the pecuniary obligations to the county commission remained suspended sine die. The mayor had the town crier come to read the meeting minutes. Over the loudspeaker in the plaza, it was announced that the entire village was insolvent. Early the next day, the same mayor accompanied Debt to the station and bought him a ticket with the treasury's last funds. When he got on the bus, he said, "You've grown very quickly; now it's time for you to go to the city. Watch out for strangers and be good!"

Upon arrival in the big city, the first thing he did was to make his way to the headquarters of the Movement of Mortgage Victims. Accompanied by a squadron of riot police and sheltering himself in overdue rent, Debt invaded their central office. With a new team of cronies, he set up his latest urban expulsion campaign.

The evictions became a daily phenomenon and storefronts gradually disappeared. By way of gobbling up small and medium businesses, Debt fattened up during his youth. Since obesity no longer allowed him to pass through narrow conventional doors, he decided to make way through the larger portals of mercantile societies and chambers of commerce.

But Debt never had enough. Gluttonous by nature, he continued to swallow up insurance companies and public institutions. He had sped up and now there was no way to stop him because, among other things, now he did not walk, but rather he was carried around by all of the judicial system reforms. Furthermore, there was no longer any law enforcement that could hold him back. All of the police stations, the military governments, and the army barracks had been seized to pay the loans the very Ministry of Defense had taken. Even their weapons had been confiscated, pawned off at laughable prices.

Debt had grown up and the time had come to leave the country to embark on trips abroad. Taking shelter in the virtue of transnational decrees and declarations, he seized parliaments, congresses, senates, and royal palaces for his exclusive use and enjoyment. He traveled about with all of

the comforts, always in first-class and happily so, because the global transportation network also belonged to him. Wherever he went, they rolled out the red carpet and men in black ties lined up to shake his hand. Debt enjoyed the luxurious receptions and the abundant banquets and, thanks to his innate diplomatic capacity, he received invitations from countries around the world. One after another, he went around exploring all of the nations and visiting their regions, their cities, their towns, and their hamlets. It was unheard of. Customs did not hold him back, and the consulates and embassies could not resist his charms. Furthermore, his bureaucratic talents allowed him to process paperwork at top speed. And since he was also quite demanding, he was soon dissatisfied with the treaties that the heads of states had ratified for him. The day arrived when he wanted to arrange the personal credit of every inhabitant, no exceptions.

But, the years fly by for all of us and Time—with her usual swiftness—ended up exhausting Debt. All of a sudden, he felt old, and every time he carried around his voluminous trunk, he choked. Yes, it was a fact: it was time to retire.

As usually happens to grand heroes after a long odyssey, Debt understood the cyclical condition of his existence and wanted to return to the beginning of his life. Thus, one morning, he showed up again, unannounced, at the Central Bank. The director greeted him in his office with an ear-to-ear grin and told him that he knew it was only a matter of time before he appeared again. Debt confessed to him that throughout his life, he had acquired excessive volume and his weight

was intolerable. The director patted his corpulent back and told him that there no longer existed anything in the world that was so heavy as to be intolerable. In fact, the director continued, new technologies store data on the web without physical support. That is to say, new virtual hard drives save information from all financial transactions in cyberspace. A new era was dawning, then, in which neither archives full of shelves, nor shelves full of paperwork, nor offices full of computers, nor computers saturated with numbers and data, were necessary. For that reason, he concluded, they were going to immediately proceed to seize all banking institutions and their obsolete computers.

“Now it’s time for all of us to fold,” the director said. “The time has come for you to head to heaven, establish yourself in the sponginess of a virtual cloud, and wait for your beatification.”

## **Grand Larceny**

The thief enters the bank and the number of people he sees surprises him. For a moment, he considers postponing the robbery, but upon further thought he decides that his situation is dire and, thus, he must proceed.

The thief is no professional. In fact, he is an honorable man who has never stolen anything from anyone. Nevertheless, a long streak of bad luck caused by macroeconomic synergies had left him in ruins. He never managed to grasp the financial world in all of its complexity; but after considering things at length he had arrived at a certain conclusion: the enemy is the bank.

The thief spent many sleepless nights mentally preparing and organizing his plan. These past few weeks, he has hardly been able to sleep, and when he finally does, a tormenting dream suddenly awakens him and he finds himself drenched in sweat and short of breath. The nightmare is repetitive: when the key moment arrives and he reaches in his cummerbund, the pistol is not there. And a clarification here: the dream is not maddening because he cannot find his weapon, but rather

because of the multicolored cummerbund worn around his waist. It is a silken cummerbund that his father gave him when he was small and because it is so tight around his ribs, it asphyxiates him.

The thief plans on dressing all in black. He wants to wear a fancy jacket, sunglasses, and a wide-brimmed hat. When it's time, he will lift up the collar of the jacket and he will pull down the brim of the hat. The sunglasses will allow him to see without being seen seeing. The gun...he is still not sure where he will put that.

The thief read the other day, in a book of popular proverbs, that he who steals a loaf of bread is called a thief and he who steals a thousand is called Master. That saying inspired him and he spent the whole night in contemplation. He sensed that there was great truth in those words and he mulled over the idea to consider it from all angles. Finally, he concluded that, since he did not know of any bakery with a thousand loaves on its shelves, he only had two options—A: To break into a bread factory, B: To interpret the sentence as a metaphor.

The thief had always hated hunting and everything related to firearms. He is a pacifist and a vegetarian, and would give his right hand for a more just world. For that reason, he had decided to take justice into his own hands and buy a toy replica of a Colt 45 revolver on the Internet. To leave no trace, he used a friend's credit card.

The thief is a cinephile and even though he knows it will be difficult to be at the center of an action movie, he hopes for, at the very least, a happy ending.



The thief is conscious of the fact that his ability to intimidate is minimal. He is short, thin, and he looks like a good guy. In the face of these obstacles, he has decided to entrust the success of his plan to a long opening speech. He does not want to force, but rather to convince. To achieve that, he has signed up for an oratory course.

The thief woke up early this morning. He washed his face, he brushed his teeth, and he showered. While he was in the shower, he asked himself if it made sense to wash his face before showering. When he got out of the shower, he washed his face again before shaving.

The thief dropped two slices of bread in the toaster and plugged in the coffee maker. He ate breakfast listening to the transistor radio. He turned the dial to tune into a radio station. Through the static, he heard a debate about the general situation of the country. The presenters were optimistic: things are very good; at the very least, much better than they will be tomorrow.

The thief left home and left the door open because he does not plan to come back ever again. Nothing of value remains inside, except a toaster, a coffee maker, a cup of coffee, an old transistor radio, a toothbrush, a razor, and a showerhead.

The thief, before opening the door to the bank, closes his eyes and makes an oath: he will not leave the bank without committing a serious robbery.

Through his sunglasses, the thief observes a handful of people standing in line and tries not to get discouraged. With his hand trembling, he caresses the butt of the reproduction

Colt 45 that he is carrying in the inner pocket of his coat. He could take out the gun and scream. He could, it's true, but he prefers to get in line to wait for the teller.

The thief patiently waits his turn and even lets a woman with a baby in her arms cut him in line. The woman thanks him. The thief, without letting her see him, tugs at his cheeks and sticks out his tongue at the baby. The silly faces entertain the baby, who giggles hysterically.

The thief stands in front of the teller, lifts up the collar of his coat, and pulls down the brim of his hat. Then, he scans the office left to right to get a look at his possible hostages. When he finally looks down, he glances at the teller, falling in love at first sight.

The teller looks at him with blue eyes that open windows to heaven, and with the sweetest voice in the world, she asks, "What will you be needing today?"

The thief, from the very beginning, opts to use the weapon of truth and he answers that he needs her.

The teller laughs and informs him that there is a lot to do today and if he could please tell her what he would like.

The thief answers that what he wanted, in the beginning, was to rob the bank, but now, he'll make do with stealing her heart.

The teller huffs and says that she is not in the mood for jokes today and that either he explain what he has come to do or that he please step aside because she must get back to work.

The thief gives a passionate speech and appeals to the

noblest sentiments, the deities of passion, and Romanticism as an artistic point of reference. As the grand finale, he asks for her number.

The teller replies no way and calls security.

The thief changes his strategy. In a blink, he grabs a pen and a sheet of paper from on top of the table and writes down a telephone number. Right after, he slides it over towards the teller and says to her: call me when you're done.

The teller does not pick it up. Irritated, she replies: get lost and go wash your face!

The thief realizes that the security guard has grabbed his arm and is dragging him towards the door.

The thief scurries off down the street and, when he turns the corner, he puts his hand in the pocket of his pants and he finds the pen he just pilfered. It's BIC brand, with a fine point.



## Tag

“I hear voices!” he told me, suddenly starting to cry. I had known him for years and I had never seen him fall apart like that. In a state of utter desperation, he confessed this to me, with a downtrodden look on his face and trembling hands. It appeared that he had not dared to tell anyone because he feared they would take him for a madman. But, he couldn’t take it any longer; that voice wouldn’t leave him in peace and it was constantly gnawing away at his consciousness.

I hugged him compassionately and I assured him he could count on me, but I also warned him that those things require treatment from specialists. He shook his head and said that the voice had definitively prohibited medical visits. It made me feel a little unnerved, thinking of his poor wife and his two girls.

We finished up the bottle of wine in silence. When he left, he vigorously shook my hands and I patted him on the back. Then, he thanked me and I noticed a lift in his spirits. Without a doubt, he had taken a great weight off his shoulders.

I shut the door and went back into the dining room to

pick up the dishes and wash up. When I was scraping off the plates, I heard a greeting:

“Hello!”

I turned around and I didn’t see anyone.

“Go back over the edges and scrub more enthusiastically!”

Those words ricocheted inside my head; suddenly, I realized what was happening. I turned to stone, stunned. Someone was speaking to me from some undetermined point inside of me. This was an extraordinary situation and I decided to be on the defensive. I stayed on guard, waiting for the words from the void to repeat themselves. I had my heart in my throat and all of my hairs on end, but I didn’t hear anything else. That night, I could hardly fall asleep.

The second incident happened when I was sitting on the terrace, absorbed by the expansive views. In Virginia, October is a festival of pigments. Autumn’s arrival splatters the foliage with vibrant hues and trims the trees with fiery garlands. The reds and yellows multiply their gamma waves, far surpassing the coloring of the finest pointillism. Every swirling gust of wind leaves the subtle trace of an invisible artist...Then, while I was enjoying the magnificence of the landscape, I heard it again.

“Nice, huh?”

The problem with the auditory system is that it is accustomed to capturing sounds from the outside in, so when auditory reception happens backwards, words get stuck inside, bouncing around the inside of the cranium, producing an annoying echo that, depending on the magnitude, can be dizzying.

I jumped up and pounded the handrail.

“What do you want from me?” I yelled.

There was no response.

I sat back down in the wicker rocker, exhausted by my own frustration. I still didn’t know then that she doesn’t partake in the typical conversational formalities. She was, rather, an autonomous unit that functioned with her own biorhythms. Hence, in the following months, she showed up on select occasions and generally only in practical-type situations. It was as if she were only interested in particular events. For example, one day, she told me to grab my raincoat or I’d get wet. One afternoon, she told me to change the saw blade or it wouldn’t cut cleanly. And, most recently, she advised me not to drink in case there was a DUI check on the way home. I don’t know whether to chock it up to coincidence, but all three times she was right, and in that way, she earned my trust.

Without realizing it, we began a phase of certain compatibility, which, naturally, she put an end to. The problem was that she wanted to invade my privacy, and she abruptly acquired the custom of discouraging me when I tried to meet pretty women. She was a cockblocker: every time I got close to a good-looking female, she scolded me, indistinctly.

“Hey, you! Watch out; there’s no way you’ll measure up!”

And, the truth is that maybe she was right because whenever she warned me, I ended up failing. But, it’s also true that I became conditioned by her admonitions, which wore away at my confidence. We all know that in these instances doubt is crippling and insecurity takes no prisoners.

The deal is that she became tactless and she began to show up regularly. She would appear, as was customary, by surprise. But the difference was that now, whatever excuse was good enough to make herself noticeable. I had to grapple with the fact that she might never leave me and so, one day, I baptized her. That happened the time I was travelling and she wanted to make herself known en route, completely contradicting the GPS.

“Avoid I-64 westbound and take the back roads; if you don’t, you’ll be stuck in traffic around Charlottesville.”

“From now on, I will call you The Voice.” I told her.

“No way! Definitely not that!” she protested. “That name makes me think of someone I don’t like.”

“Who?”

“Frank Sinatra.”

And that was how the first of the two conversations that we never continued began. It was a brief exchange of words, but enough to show me the true nature of The Voice.

The Voice has a velvety tone and a classy inflection. She pronounced words neither like a man nor like a woman. It was somewhere in between—neutral, androgynous. That said, she had a very marked southern drawl. Even though she never said “Y’all,” she still spoke with the nice long vowels typical of the Bible Belt.

The second and last time I spoke with The Voice was on a basketball court. I had gone alone to stretch and practice my shots. I sunk a three-pointer and the rebound flew across the court. I chased after the ball to half-court and I don’t



know why, but I turned my head towards the other basket. I grabbed the ball, and with my arm in the shape of a giant hook, I catapulted it with all my strength. The orb grazed the backboard and went in cleanly, without touching the hoop. After the shot, I heard The Voice.

“You are Jesus, the true Son of God!”

I was frozen solid. If they would have pricked me with a needle, I swear they wouldn’t have drawn a drop of blood. I quickly pulled myself together.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“It was a joke,” The Voice said, letting out a mocking giggle.

I wasn’t familiar with this facetious tendency of hers and the truth is that I didn’t find it funny at all because that laugh was malicious, catty, and mean-spirited. The Voice had gone too far. I couldn’t allow this. I had been beaten as a child in pre-school, taunted in grade school, and bullied in high school; now, though, I was a grown man and couldn’t accept someone making fun of me from inside my own body.

That same week I visited an affable psychiatrist, with a white coat and modern glasses that gave him a look that was both intellectual and warm at the same time. I told him that I heard a voice and the psychiatrist, without looking at me, scrawled something down on his pad of paper. When I left, I vigorously shook his hands and he patted me on the back. While I thanked him, I couldn’t help but to feel pity for him. I suppose that he, in turn, noticed a lift in my spirits. I closed the door with the firm conviction that I had taken a great weight off my shoulders.



## **The Sweetest Little Fellow**

A few strong knocks on the door roused the woman from her easy chair. When she opened the door, though, no one was there.

She was still eyeing left and right when she heard a gentle cry at her feet. The woman looked down and what she saw left her startled. A basket had been dropped at the doorstep. Inside, wrapped up in rags, rested a sweet little fellow, vigorously moving its limbs.

The woman's heart melted. She was a widow who lived a sorry existence. Sadness and solitude consumed her and old age crept up on her. Up to a certain point, then, it was logical that she thought that a little thing like that would keep her good company.

She grabbed the basket, brought it inside, and placed in on the dining room table. She remained standing, contemplating the little fellow, and ruminating about what to do. On one hand, she was aware of the fact that if she notified the police, it was almost sure they wouldn't let her keep it. On the other hand, she knew that without help she wouldn't be able to

raise it properly. To sum it all up, letting it go, with those big brown eyes, was simply impossible! Impossible!

She decided to go see the neighbor, who was a retired doctor, also old and widowed. She made her way over with the basket clumsily in hand. She stood in front of the door, left the basket at the stoop, and gave two good thumps with the doorknocker. Instead of waiting for an answer, she scurried off and waited behind a tree with her eye on the door.

The doctor opened and when he saw the little fellow, his eyes widened and his mouth dropped. He reacted quickly, though. He leaned over, picked up the basket, and with great tenderness, he rocked it to stop its crying.

Pleased by this show of affection, the woman left her hiding place and told the doctor the whole story. Finally, she confessed that at her age, she didn't think she had the strength to raise a little fellow all by herself and she asked him if he might like to share custody with her.

The physician wavered for a few seconds. It was an important decision and, before answering, he wanted to give the little fellow a couple of medical tests. With that in mind, he ran into his house. He came back out almost instantly, donning his white coat. He was carrying a thermometer in one hand and a stethoscope in the other. While he adjusted his earpieces, the doctor confirmed that he wasn't accustomed to these types of exams, and much less such a hurried one. He carefully placed the diaphragm of the stethoscope where he assumed the patient's heart was. The accelerated heartbeat worried him. Next, he placed a thermometer under his armpit.

101.3 degrees. The physician was concerned. With a brisk movement, his hand vanished into a pocket of his coat and he pulled out a penlight. He planned to finish the exam with the eyes. He pressed a button and shined a beam of light into the right eye. You didn't need to be an ophthalmologist to see that the deep brown iris was full of life.

That evening, the three of them spent the night together at his house. The doctor and the woman had chicken salad, pickles, cole slaw, fried green tomatoes, baked ham, banana pudding, and chocolate chip cookies. The little fellow—who was discovered to have a weenie—was given a bottle with goat milk. When it was time for dessert, they considered a few names, finally deciding that due to the circumstances, the most appropriate choice was to call him Moses.

From that day on, the woman always slept at the doctor's house. She would arrive in the evening and head straight for the kitchen, with bags of food in tow. While she diced the vegetables and fried the meat and the fish, he stacked twigs and logs in the fireplace. When the meal was ready and the fire was warm, they would turn off the lights and light candles and the fondue pot; the doctor was a romantic gourmand. They would eat at the dining room table, in front of the fireplace. In between morsels, they would hold hands and look at the little fellow, sleeping in a basket near the hearth.

It wasn't even two months before the doctor asked a carpenter to make him a cradle. It was made of hardwood; the body was cherry and the legs were walnut. Moses was worth it.

The biblical essence of their encounter convinced them that the little fellow embodied good fortune. For them, Moses represented the best possible of omens and his arrival marked a time of prosperity.

Their predictions weren't exactly correct though and both died just three years after the newcomer's arrival; he, of a heart attack, after a rich meal, and she, off the edge of a precipice, after slipping when reaching for a flower a bit too far out of the way.

Thus, the doctor was never able to see Moses fully grown nor fulfill his dream of having Moses bring him the paper when old age finally got the best of him. Similarly, the woman's wishes also remained unrealized; she had hoped Moses would guard their property and defend it from bandits when she was old and weak.

Bereft of his protectors, Moses ended up living on the street and had to learn to look out for himself from a very young age. He was about three years old, more or less, and would wander the whole day in search of something to eat. At mealtimes, he would walk up to restaurant terraces and beg the patrons for leftovers with pleading eyes. At night, he scrounged through trash bins, ripping through plastic bags, and picking out everything that his instinct told him was edible. At fairs and festivals, he walked up to the tents. If there was a barbeque, he hid between the tables and waited for an opportune moment to snatch fallen bits of sausages and bread rolls from the pavement. If there was a wedding reception, he hid inside the labyrinth of legs and scoured for spilled glasses of wine and beer.

Moses went along like that for more than ten years and died at age thirteen, curled up in a doorway. The story may seem sad. In fact, many people, upon hearing his story, think Moses's life was a tragedy. All said, it is important to know that just before taking his last breath, an Italian tourist who was walking out of a bakery with a loaf of bread under his arm passed by. Seeing Moses moribund in the corner, the Italian leaned over. When they exchanged glances, his big brown eyes, watery with fever, touched the tourist. The Italian broke off a piece of the bread and offered it to him, but Moses didn't open his mouth because he no longer even had the strength to chew. Nonetheless, grateful as he was, he wagged his tail.





## **R.I.P.**

Novel died crushed by a convertible that Blog was driving. The accident occurred late Halloween night in a Santa Clara industrial park in the heart of Silicon Valley. According to eyewitnesses, Blog's automobile was operating at top speed when he crashed into Novel, who had been hobbling across the pedestrian crosswalk. It was a hit and run. Novel was left plastered on the asphalt, unconscious. The EMS team arrived immediately. En route to the hospital, though, they lost her vital signs and even though they gave it a go with the defibrillator in the ambulance, they were unable to revive her. Novel was already an old widow and a life full of passionate affairs had worn out her ventricles. The most famous heart in history surrendered to death.

At the funeral, a company of eminent persons filled the church from dome to door. Critics occupied the three benches in the back. Directly in front of them sat the entire Theatre family, headed by Comedy and Drama. They were accompanied by their twin sons, Tragicomedy and Melodrama, and a group of their cousins, Comic Sketch, Vaudeville, Farce,

and Entremés. The front benches were reserved for Novel's children: Short Story and Fable. Immediately behind them were her adopted children: Apology, Panegyric, and Flash Fiction. In the aisles, Essay, Diary, and Memoir crowded together. In the ambulatory, Sacramental Act gazed at them from a distance. On the other hand, Eclogue wanted to retreat to the chapel to say a monologue. And, lastly, Libel and Parody were left out in the plaza because they had not been allowed in. Eating peanuts in the shade of a magnolia tree, the former spent his time slandering and the latter, imitating in burlesque the other's slurs.

The Mass was a spectacle. The Liturgy of the Word ended up exceptionally long. Ode took charge of the Alleluia, Elegy read the Gospel, and Epopee gave the Homily. The musical ceremony was under the care of Song and Masquerade, who performed a whole-hearted rendition of Mozart's Requiem and a wide repertoire of Gregorian chants.

As the funeral came to an end, the long line of attendees affectionately gave their condolences to Novel's two children. There were some truly emotional situations as well, such as when Apology hugged Short Story and told him it was time to find some moral lesson in all of this; now was the moment to fill the hole that his mother had left and finally make an effort to grow up. There was another instance in which Fable broke down in tears. Then, Comedy of Manners consoled her, reminding her of those pleasant times when they all got together to tell stories around the promethean fire with their grandparents, Myth and Cosmogony.

The hearse departed the Church, followed by a long procession. On the way to the cemetery, Short Story received a message. Discreetly, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and read the text. It was Epistle, who apologized for not being able to attend the burial:

*E-mail attacked me when I was sleeping. He beat me and fled. I'm at the hospital. XXX*



## **How Funny!**

When he wakes up, he realizes that he already has the smile on his face.

He tries to remember his dream because he senses that the smile results from some oneiric experience. But, in trying to remember, a look of concentration engulfs his face and the smile unhooks from his jaw, slides down the sheets, falls off the bed, bounces on the floor, and slips through a crack in the window.

From here on, things happen quickly. The smile free-falls from the eleventh floor and doesn't hit the cobbled sidewalk because the waiter has just opened the awning of the ice cream shop. The sailcloth cushions the landing and repels the smile in a parabola towards the street.

Seated at the last table on the terrace is a pale Finn eating mint ice cream. The woman doesn't know it, but she is sitting right in the path of the falling smile. Partway through a spectacular lick of the cone, the Finn starts to blush unexpectedly and draws a wide smile that unveils her green teeth. This gesture, and a casual exchange of glances, leads

the man at a neighboring table to believe that she was coming on to him.

Conscious of the fact that great opportunities such as this are few and far between, the man jumps up expeditiously, moves towards her in four giant steps, and kisses her cheek. The kiss, sticky-sounding and long, was not a welcome move, and the smile unhinges from her lower lip and drifts into the air above the ice cream cone. Soon, however, the curvilinear shape causes it to slide off, and accompanied by a trace of minty cream, the smile drips off the cone, landing on the table.

Ten minutes later, the same waiter who had before unrolled the awning, now wipes the table and carries the smile off in a wet rag. When he rinses the rag in the sink, the drain swallows up the smile. It heads down the pipes and dumps into the sewer. From there, it stops briefly in an irrigation channel before finding itself drawn downstream in a river current, which, inevitably, opens to the sea.

It crosses the sea, crawling across the benthic zone, which is to say across the sea floor. The subaquatic universe is unfamiliar and surviving among the fauna that lives attached to the substrate turns out to be quite difficult for it. First, it tries to approach a lobster, but it discovers that the crustacean is covered in a rigid carapace, and because of this lack of flexibility, things will never click. Shortly after, it approaches a school of sargos flitting about in the posidonia, and tries to stick to one of them, but the fish keeps gasping and the air bubbles it exhales make it impossible for the smile to attach

itself. Lastly, it tries with a clam, which at first seems like a terrific being to live with since it has precisely the shape of a big mouth. Nevertheless, the smile's excitement wanes when it confirms that the mollusk never opens its lips.

On the edge of desperation, it finally arrives at an island, tossed about in the sea foam. On the shore of the beach, a young Italian is splashing his face. The young man plants himself against the breaker, stretches out his arms, and cups his hands to grab a bit of water. What he picks up, in addition, is the smile. When the salt water hits his face, his lips stretch out, and his mouth turns into a smile from ear to ear. Upon noticing the lift in his cheek muscles, the young man is surprised; just a few seconds ago, he was feeling down after an argument with his girlfriend and, thus, found this gesture of satisfaction out of place. The Italian looks up with the suspicion that the smile had fallen from the sky, and, even though he's no devout believer, thanks God.





## Olympic Spirit

A pair of light and flexible running shoes hits the scorching asphalt on Route 95 between Nevada and California. The rest of the equipment, from bottom to top, consists of cotton socks, loose shorts, a white t-shirt, a stuffed backpack, and a visor to protect from the sun that hammers down. The woman wipes the sweat off her forehead with the wristband on her right hand and when the car approaches, she stretches out her other hand, the left, the one with the sports watch, and sticks up her thumb.

The car brakes and the woman breathes a sigh of relief; it's the first car that has passed by in two hours.

The tinted window rolls down automatically and, gripping the steering wheel, a portly man with a bovine gaze appears. She asks him if he's headed to Bishop and he nods his head. The woman opens the passenger door, relaxes into her seat, sets her backpack between her knees, and buckles her seatbelt.

The man drives in silence with his eyes glued to the road. The woman asks if he is from around here. He shakes his head no. A few minutes later, the woman asks him if he would

like to turn on the radio. Listening to music relaxes her, she adds, especially when traveling long distances. The man doesn't respond. The woman looks at him out of the corner of her eye, a little uneasy. He is obese, with droopy cheeks and a neck so swollen that it is nearly impossible to find his chin. His hands are wide and hairy, with bloated fingers tensely grabbing the steering wheel.

When they arrive at the intersection with State Route 168, the man, instead of exiting, stays on Route 95. The woman, surprised, tells him that he has made a mistake. The man doesn't answer.

On the entire ride, they do not pass any other vehicles. Death Valley is a solitary and hostile place. Spiders, snakes, and scorpions endure the inhospitable conditions atop the desert sands. From a mountaintop, a fox looks down on a car that turns off the highway, down a gravel road.

The wheels totter over fallen rocks and pebbles, raising a cloud of dust behind them. The car stops and the dust clears.

The man twists the key a quarter turn to shut off the engine and a blanket of silence settles over the valley. At the peak of the midday sun, the only shadow—the one cast off the chassis of the car—is perfectly vertical.

The man stretches out his arm and places his fat, hairy hand on the woman's knee. Then, he begins to rub her kneecap with his sausagey fingers.

The woman reacts quickly. With the side of her right hand, she karate-chops the man's neck, which momentarily cuts off his breathing. With her left hand, she jerks the key out of the

ignition. Lastly, with her right hand again, she opens the door, grabs the handle of her backpack, and gets out of the car in one agile jump.

The woman dashes away from the vehicle with a memorable sprint. Without looking back, she runs two hundred and fifty meters with one hundred and thirty-eight steps. Fifty seconds later, when she slows the pace of her leaps, she hears a distant murmur over her shoulders. It is the muddled screams of the man, so barely audible that she could only understand some of his words: “You’re lost... the middle of nowhere...without shelter...I’ll catch you...” The fat man cries out all of that and more, panting away in pursuit of her. She, on the other hand, distances herself further with every trot, without so much as even tousling her hair.

Five minutes later, she turns around for the last time and makes out a tiny silhouette on the horizon. Blurred by the haze, the man looks like a hologram. The woman stops and throws the keys in a deep crevice between two rocks. She pulls out her water bottle and takes a sip. From the side pocket of her backpack, she grabs a compass and a detailed map of the Death Valley National Park. She unfolds the map and, with just a quick visual recognition of the surrounding orography, she effortlessly places her current location. If her calculations aren’t incorrect, she will have to cross the mountain range in front of her to run into Scotty Castle Highway. From there, crossing over the road that leads to Furnace Creek Ranch, the Forty-Niner Café can’t be more than sixty kilometers away.

The ultramarathon runner starts her stopwatch and takes off at a healthy pace. If she keeps a good rhythm, when she arrives, the kitchen will still be open for dinner.

## Emotional Triangles

The couple isn't expecting the visit, but they are both happy to see him. The Friend greets them effusively—a hug for him, a kiss on the cheek for her—and he asks if he is inconveniencing them.

“Of course not!” says the Wife.

“A visit is something to celebrate!” says the Husband, who heads to the kitchen to pour some drinks.

The Wife has the Friend sit in the living room and they get on with a conversation in which she asks about a series of apparently unrelated things. The Friend answers that he's doing well; his family too; that he has big plans for their anniversary; that the mother-in-law keeps kicking—ha, ha!—; that he has to pick up the car that is in the shop...yeah, the shop two blocks from here; that work's going better than ever; that the dog is still alive, but half-deaf, poor thing; that our little girl already has a boyfriend...ultra-modern, with three piercings in unexpected places—ha, ha, ha!—; that the boy won a tournament at the tennis club, but he lost half an incisor in a collision with a racket...no, no, it's no big deal—the dentist made him a cap.

The Wife excuses herself and says that she's going to the kitchen because the Husband is taking a long time.

When she enters the kitchen she finds the Husband preparing some mojitos. At the precise moment in which he is quartering a lemon, she hugs him from behind, licks his neck, and grabs his crotch. The Husband is taken aback by this outburst of passion. In fact, it's a novelty after fifteen years of marriage and even more so keeping in mind that the wife has been avoiding him for three months citing banal excuses. The Husband goes stiff and a few seconds later, is screwing her on the teak kitchen table.

The Friend, sprawled out on the pleather sofa, overhears unmistakable groans. He finds this funny and smiles understandingly. When twenty minutes have passed, though, he gets concerned and considers leaving. In the end, he stands up and grabs a book from the shelf—*The Enigma of the Golden Ratio*—. He flips through the book and right after, looks at his watch, deciding to grant them fifteen more minutes, maximum. They come out of the kitchen flushed. The Husband carries out a tray with three glasses adorned with sprigs of mint. The Wife brings a few coasters, which she places on the coffee table. The Husband leaves one glass on each coaster. She fixes her hair. The Wife has chapped lips and the skin on her cheeks looks chafed. The Friend turns his gaze from the face of the Wife to that of the Husband: two-day beard, hirsute, and rough.

One hundred and seven days later, the Friend comes back to visit, but this time, he calls first. The Husband, whose

smooth chin is lightly fragranced with aftershave, opens the door; they hug.

“She’ll be down in a minute,” says the Husband. “She’s showering.”

They sit in the living room. They chat, drink two Mai Tais, and play three games of chess—one victory for each and one draw. She, however, still hasn’t come down. The Husband excuses himself and says that he’s going to see what the devil the Wife is doing. Upon entering the room, he finds the Wife in high heels and black lingerie with crimson trim. She throws herself onto him and the Husband lets her go for it, happy to put an end to a period of abstinence that proved far too long: one hundred and seven days.

The Friend hears moans and groans. Slightly uneasy, he stands up and grabs a book from the shelf—*A History of Prime Numbers*—. He flips through. Soon, though, he closes it and puts it back. A series of shrieks provokes in him a certain feeling of awkwardness. Immediately after, he hears the thwack of spanks, giggles, and the shattering of a piece of glass. The Friend gets the heebie jeebies and decides to leave. He grabs his jacket off the coatrack and, before heading out, he glances over at the chessboard; in square A8, his king has been cornered—he has lost the last game.

The following day the Husband phones the Friend and apologizes for what happened last night. Then, he asks him if he could meet up in the afternoon because he needs to speak with him personally...No, the Husband doesn’t want the Friend to come over to his house...Better in a bar...

Yes, it's very important.

Sipping a Piña Colada, the Husband explains to the Friend that, because of a mysterious phenomenon that he has still been unable to explain, the Wife only wants to make love when the Friend is around. This is the conclusion he has reached after a night of insomnia. In half a year, two frisky nights, and on both occasions, the Friend was visiting. The Husband, who is a professor of Mathematics, has done the calculations and the numbers agree with him. It could be a coincidence, sure, but there is only a 1 in 32,400 chance that such is the case.

"You can't do anything about it," says the Husband. "If you are not around, she doesn't want it."

The Friend feels perplexed. In the first place, he doesn't know whether to take the statement as flattery or offense. A long silence ensued and when the Husband expectantly gazes at him seeking a response, the Friend turns his face and looks at the ground.

"And what do you want me to do?" asks the Friend.

"Come and see me more often, if you would."

During the two weeks that follow, the Friend finds himself overwhelmed by the repeated phone calls and emails begging him to visit. The Friend finally accepts, reticently, and he shows up after first sending a telegraphic message—today at 5—, a Sunday afternoon.

When he arrives, he is surprised to find the door cracked. He enters. On the coffee table in the living room, on a coaster, there is a Blue Long Island with a straw and a mini-umbrella.



There is also a selection of CDs, movies, magazines, and a book—a biography of Pythagoras. The Friend sits on the pleather sofa, puts the straw in his mouth, and takes a long sip of the drink. The vodka, gin, and rum climb up the little tube and explode in his mouth in pleasant convergence. The Friend closes his eyes and tries to savor the tequila flavor, which he still has not been able to identify. Then, he hears the first groan from the second floor. Four hours, one movie, three chapters, six articles, and twenty-seven songs later, the Friend stands up to go to pee. Through the bathroom window that opens to the interior court, he hears the screams of the Wife and the guttural howls of the Husband. While he's washing his hands, he hears her say:

“Now talk dirty to me!”

The Friend leaves the house with a bittersweet taste in his mouth and with a guilty feeling, all of which he finds entirely unfair.

That night, the Friend can't sleep and in the morning, he goes to work exhausted. He sits on his rolling chair and turns on the computer. Upon opening his e-mail, a message from the Husband pops up. The e-mail is short, just two lines. In the first, he thanks him and in the second, he asks when can he come back. The Friend is indignant.

Incapable of concentrating on office work, the Friend enters dangerous psychological territory. With his feet perched atop his desk, he spends the afternoon reflecting on the concept of friendship while twirling a pen in his right hand. He puts down the pen and his feet only to look up the semantic field

of the word **favor** online. By force of his own pondering, the moment arrives in which the Friend addresses the situation from an exclusively sentimental point of view. Then, under the premise that he is the one who provokes this morbid pleasure, he wonders if the Wife might have a thing for him. And, as expected, he thinks precisely yes. And, the more he thinks about it, the more irrefutable the conclusion seems.

At night, the Friend tosses and turns in bed, careful not to wake up his wife. For two hours, he has been trying to find the right position to sleep, but there is no way. He doesn't want another sleepless night, and nonetheless, he is aware of the question that is keeping him awake, the one that he doesn't want to answer: now that he knows that the Wife has a thing for him, could he also say that he has a thing for her? The question is complex because of its moral, spiritual, and physiological nuances. But, the more he considers it, the more he limits the answer to a strictly biological domain, which manifests itself with an incontestable swelling of his willy.

One Monday morning, aware of the fact that the Husband should be at work, the Friend shows up at the Couple's house with a bouquet of red roses. The Wife, upon opening the door, turns to stone. He decides to take advantage of the surprise effect and tries to reach her lips with a frontal attack. The Wife, however, repels him with a dry whack. While the roses scatter on the ground, she shouts:

“Don't you ever come back to this house, dirtbag!”

## Royal Vocation

The queen turns on the faucet to rinse her face, but only a trickle of water flows out. From the bathroom, she loudly pronounces:

“The sink isn’t working!”

The king, still half-asleep, tosses in bed and mumbles:

“I’ll let the chamberlain know first thing.”

\* \* \*

Five hours later, a plumber unscrews the faucet from the sink basin as the chamberlain looks on. He skillfully dismounts the different pieces—the handle, the nut-washer and gasket, the threaded spindle, the packing, the springs—examining them one by one. He blows on the filter and checks the O-ring. Right after, he opens and closes the tap and notices how the water flow is never more than a steady trickle. Finally, he shakes his head and, walking away from the chamberlain, he says:

“May I?”

The plumber tiptoes over to the little bathroom window, sticks his head out, looks up, and scans the pipes of the inner patio.

“What a wreck!” he exclaims, his voice echoing off the patio walls.

The plumber twists his neck so it could again fit through the bathroom window. After, he dusts off his chest and groans, half-disgusted. The chamberlain observes him expectantly.

“The problem isn’t the faucet,” the plumber explains, “but rather the piping, which is old and blocked up. If they want to have good water pressure, it’s going to be necessary to change the entire installation. And, it needs to be done with copper pipes; this system is entirely out of date and things are done differently now.” Here, the plumber pauses for a moment, shoots a disdainful glare at the chamberlain, and pronounces, “I can’t believe this; gold faucets and lead pipes! Where do you see that!”

“Will this be expensive?” the chamberlain inquires.

“Woof!” exclaims the plumber, raising his eyebrows and tilting his head “A fortune! This palace is gigantic...Just counting the meters of piping, and the walls that will have to be torn up to replace them...Then, the whole installation will have to be re-plastered. And lastly, we’ll need painters to plaster and repaint because I suppose they’re not going to want to see the new plumbing, right?”

“Well, the truth is that I don’t know how these things go,” the chamberlain replies, shrugging his shoulders. “What do you want me to say? When things need to be fixed...”

“Oh! And the drainage pipes!” the plumber interrupts. “Haven’t you seen the drains?” The chamberlain shakes his head, overwhelmed. “No? Well, those also need to be changed, because sooner or later those are going to get blocked up and you’ll have to call a pump truck. And don’t think that’s it because to change the drainage pipes and the general plumbing, we’ll have to use rope and harnesses in the interior patio...All in all, a lot of work, a ton, and dangerous work, at that. Quite the bill!”

The chamberlain accompanies the plumber to the exit. While he opens the latches of the entrance gate, the chamberlain emphasizes that the new installation is of maximum importance because it is entirely indecent that the king and queen have to wash their faces with pitchers and bowls. A mocking giggle, buried with a fake cough, escapes the plumber, a Trotskyist affiliated with the General Workers Union. When he catches his breath, he apologizes and promises to write up an itemized estimate as soon as possible. They say goodbye with a firm handshake. As the chamberlain pushes the gate shut, some unexpected resistance prevents it from fully closing. It is the plumber, who has stuck his foot in the threshold to block the door.

“I am forgetting one thing,” the worker says. “I have to check the meter, which I’m sure is also old and in need of replacement.”

They traverse all through the palace following tubes and lead pipes. Finally, in a windowless room, on top of some wooden shelves, they find the water meter. The plumber

unzips his tool bag, takes out a flashlight, and examines it.

“Just what I suspected!” said the worker. “It’s bust.”

“This too?”

“Yes. You have spent years paying only the minimum, just the rental of the apparatus. It’s been decades since the water has been paid for. When I notify Municipal Water Supply of Madrid, the bill is going to shock them.”

\* \* \*

The prince is in his chamber, stretched out on the bed, watching Spiderman III, when he hears the noise of a drilling rig rattling the transom windows. Unnerved by the disturbance, he jumps out of bed, and takes four steps over to the window. He opens it, folds his torso over the ledge, and looks down. What he sees changes his destiny: two men dressed in blue overalls and red helmets quickly moving up and down on ropes. From time to time, they stop, take out drills from tool belts hanging off their hips, and perforate the wall. Then, they place a plastic anchor and a screw in each hole. The prince turns off the television and spends the whole morning leaning out the window, carefully following the movements of the workers.

That same afternoon, the prince approaches a plumber who is pulling a lead pipe out of the kitchen and he asks for permission to watch him work. The plumber says that as long as he doesn’t distract him too much, it shouldn’t be a problem. Surprisingly, the prince proves to be quite attentive

and passes along the tools that he requests—pliers, a hammer, a screwdriver—so the plumber doesn't have to come down from the ladder as he works.

The renovations last one month. During that time, the prince never leaves home. He is decided; what he wants to do is to help and to learn. Because of his commitment, he dedicates all of his energy to the task. Furthermore, he demonstrates great aptitude for the job. For example, one day a worker shows him how to apply solder, and the very next day, the prince is already sealing corner fittings.

But, the prince's interest is not just in the practice itself; he also wants to learn vocabulary. So, whenever he sees a new piece, he asks its name and its relationship with the rest of the pieces. His seemingly limitless curiosity allows him to speedily distinguish a threaded tee and a bushing, malleable copper and rigid copper, and a one-way valve and a pneumatic control valve. The workers warm up to the prince, and he doesn't take long to earn their friendship. Soon, they are kidding around with one another and telling off-color jokes. They even seem to establish a type of camaraderie. Inevitably, the excessive familiarity leads to imprudent actions. On the last day of renovations—taking advantage of the fact that the chamberlain and the palace bigwigs are in the TV room, distracted with the final stage of the Tour de France—the plumbers harness up the prince and allow him to scale the inner patio.

\* \* \*

This turns out to be a decisive experience which assures the prince of his vocation. From this day forward, at school with his classmates, at Christmastime with his family, or in exotic countries surrounded by important diplomats, when they ask him what he wants to be when he grows up, the prince always answers the same way: When I grow up, I want to be a plumber. And despite their insistent questioning—But you don't want to be an astronaut? Nor a football player? Nor a king? —the prince shakes his head and proves himself irreducible: No, I want to be a plumber.

This obstinacy—which everyone finds so cute at first — eventually becomes a problem for him.

It is the first day of prep school and the prince shakes his head and refuses to go because he says that he needs to go to trade school and complete a plumbing apprenticeship. The king, for the first time in his life, smacks his son.

That year, his academic performance is lamentable. The prince shows no interest in any subject and his teacher is forced to call a conference with the queen. The queen appears discreetly—in an official car without banners, wearing a black gabardine and sunglasses. At the door of the prep school, the headmaster is waiting to take her to meet with his teacher. In an office where a photo of her husband is hanging, the queen listens incredulously to all of the complaints the educator makes of her son:

“The prince doesn't pay attention to his teachers; he never does his homework, and he hands in his exams blank. He hasn't done anything productive all year!” At this point, the



educator pauses and appears to doubt for a second. But then she specifies: “Well, there is one exception. One freezing January morning, the radiator went out. That day, the prince took out a Swiss Army knife from his pocket and, I still don’t know how, he fixed the hot water entry valves.”

\* \* \*

The king decides to hire a renowned professor to give private classes to his son. His hope is that the professor would win over the prince by tackling the topic of water from a more general angle. In this way, maybe the son would lose interest in plumbing and acquire a taste for physics. The professor visits the palace three times a week and gives the prince long lectures about hydrostatics and hydrodynamics. He explains the principles of Pascal and Archimedes, the theory of communicating vessels, Bernoulli’s theorem, and the Joule effect. The lessons are tiring to the prince, though, and the somnolent voice of the physicist makes him drowsy. He does his best to hide his yawns and while he pretends to listen to the professor, under his desk he is testing the resistance of clamps and cable ties.

\* \* \*

After the failure with the physicist, the king decides to take his son to Brazil. His plan is to visit the Itaipu dam. He is convinced that when the prince sees that gigantic system of

water containment, he will become fascinated with industrial engineering.

The day that the prince and the king visit the largest dam in the world, the technicians open the floodgates so that they can witness how millions of gallons of water hurl down the spillway. The flow of the water is deafening and when it crashes into the Parana River, a dense mist arises that traps the light and iridesces, leaving multiple rainbows in its wake.

Afterward, they are taken on a tour of the control room. In front of a piece of wall plastered with monitors, the workers explain to them how the dam produces 95% of Paraguay's energy supply and 20% of Brazil's. Next, they pass through the hydraulic turbine room as the workers comment on how the electromagnetic rotor machines transform the energy of the falling water into mechanical energy. They tell them that through each turbine, a quantity of water passes through which is equivalent to that which spills out of all of Iguazu's three hundred waterfalls combined. And, so that they get the idea, they take them to see Iguazu Falls by helicopter.

The prince doesn't utter a word the whole day.

At night, the prince stretches out on the bed in the suite of the Sheraton while watching *Batman Returns*. Thousand of penguins loaded with missiles on their shoulders are marching on the streets of Gotham, when, all of a sudden, the prince hears a knock at the door.

"Come in!" he says, pushing the pause button.

It's his father. The king enters, smiling, and comes over to sit at the foot of the bed.

“What did you think of the Itaipu Dam?” asks the monarch.

“A crying shame!” answers the son, indignant.

“Why?”

“It seems unbelievable: so much money wasted on top technology and yet, when I went to the bathroom, of the ten sinks I found, none of them had decent water pressure!”

\* \* \*

A few weeks before his eighteenth birthday, the queen asks him what car he would like for his birthday. The prince answers that he’d like a pick-up truck.

\* \* \*

The day after his birthday party, the prince wakes up with a hangover. When he goes to the bathroom to pee, the king intercepts him in the hallway and lectures him about the responsibilities of the Crown. It is a long, roundabout speech, which leaves the prince’s head pounding. From all of the chattering, the only thing that is clear to him is that, from now on, his father wants him to come along on all of his trips around the world so that he gets warmed up for his role as king.

\* \* \*

The first activity planned on the royal agenda is a visit to the president of United States.

At the airport, they board without checking their bags or passing through the metal detector because of their diplomatic immunity. The father's carry-on luggage is crocodile-skin; the son carries an oversize sports duffel slung across his back. With every step the prince takes, the scrap metal in his bag jangles and clanks.

When they arrive at the White House, the president and his daughter are waiting for them on the North Portico. They shake hands and pat backs on the marble steps leading up to the entryway. Right after, they walk through the Cross Hall and pass into the Blue Room, whose oval walls are adorned with portraits of George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. After exchanging formalities, the president makes an aside to the king. The president's daughter and the prince are left in the corner of the room, seated in upholstered chairs, separated by a coffee table where there are two bottles of mineral water and a couple of glasses.

The first thing the prince asks is if they have any problem with the water. The president's daughter—with her mahogany skin, full cheeks, and corkscrew curls—giggles and says that, no, in the United States they have an integrated water plan and there are national reserves that guarantee sufficient water supply in times of draught. The prince shakes his head and replies that she didn't understand the question; what he wants to know is in what condition is the house tap. The girl grabs a bottle of mineral water, points to the label, and explains that

he doesn't need to worry, that the water that they're drinking comes from pristine springs that flow in the Colorado Rockies. And, in any case, the water in the house—from the tap—is also potable because in Washington they've installed water filtration systems on the Potomac.

The prince shakes his head again and insists that she still doesn't understand; he, like the king, has come to the United States to do work, but unlike his father, who has chosen a diplomatic career, he is inclined toward plumbing. And, for that reason that he is taking advantage of the opportunity to offer his services.

The prince's comments amuse the girl; half-laughing, she responds that the marble sink in the garden sometimes doesn't drain properly.

Upon hearing these words, the prince jumps to his feet, grabs the duffel resting on the floor, and exits out the side door. The girl is momentarily disoriented, but follows after him almost immediately. The king and the president follow them with their eyes, surprised.

In the garden, the prince unscrews the trap with a wrench and shows it to the girl. The inside of the trap is covered in a dry paste. While the prince scrapes off the crust with a screwdriver, he explains that this blockage has been accumulating for years, but with some patient scraping, it could still be cleared. In any case—he emphasizes—that is only a temporary solution because in the long run, if they don't want clogged drains, they will need to change the whole piece. The president's daughter nods, pinching her nose with her index finger and thumb.

Twenty minutes later, they return to the Blue Room. She bursts in with a long face; he, on the other hand, is smiling, content with a job well done. When the king sees his son, he is speechless; why has he put on those blue overalls?

On the flight home, the king doesn't speak with anyone. He sits alone and looks out the airplane window into the darkness of the night sky. He's depressed.

In the early morning hours, now back at the palace, he tosses and turns in bed, unable to sleep. It's the jet lag, he tries to convince himself, staring at the fluorescent digits of the radio-alarm clock.

At eight in the morning he decides to get out of bed. The sleepless night has left him in a very bad mood. He pees, washes his face, puts on his dressing gown, and goes to find his son.

He storms into his son's room, furious. But, his son is not there. He yells to the chamberlain and asks for the prince. The chamberlain replies that the prince is in the cellar changing out an old heater.

The king opens the door of the cellar to find the prince outfitted in blue overalls, drilling holes in the wall. Incapable of containing his rage, the king loses his calm and rebukes the prince:

"You are a disgrace to the family! You are a curse! You are the son of the devil!"

The prince, who is rummaging about with his back to the king, doesn't react to the father's scolding and continues drilling into the wall. His indifference exasperates the king,

who nearly suffocates as he redoubles his efforts to get his son's attention, yelling:

“Scoundrel! Useless son of a...”

But the king's cries fall on deaf ears; for as much as he screams, his hoarse voice cannot overcome the sound of the drill, which drowns out the insults.

When the drill bit stops spinning, the prince turns around.

“What's that, Father?”

The king is fuming, lit up like a torch. Ire burns in his throat and he feels the tingle of needles on the upper half of his left arm.

“Are you okay, Father?”

The king has to lean on the wall. His legs are limp with exhaustion and it becomes a struggle to breathe. He opens his mouth and inhales forcefully, but the oxygen never makes it to his lungs. It is an agonizing situation, as if the air were thinning. The objects around him seem to sharpen and then briefly lose consistency. The profiles get hazy, the light goes pale, and the world fills with deliquescent light. Suddenly, the king understands what is happening: it is the end. His strength abandons him, and as he falls unconscious, the rage melts into wellbeing.

With the realization that his father is collapsing, the prince drops the drill, runs towards him, and catches him as he hits the ground. He climbs the stairs with his father in his arms, crosses the hallway, enters the garage, and puts him in his pick-up truck. Immediately after, he opens the garage door, starts the vehicle, and heads to the hospital.

They try to revive him with the defibrillator to no avail.

The prince waits in the hall, biting his nails. The door of the room opens and a nurse walks out; she delivers the bad news:

“We couldn’t save him. His heart wouldn’t hold out.”

The prince lets out a shout, runs into the hospital room, and wraps his arms around the inert body of his father.

“Why? Why?” the prince repeats, sniffing, as his tears fall across the king’s chest.

\* \* \*

One month later, the new king, dressed in blue overalls and a red helmet, is hanging off the palace cornice, with a climbing rope and a harness. His goal is to change the gutter, which is attached to the façade that faces the plaza. The prince works away for a couple of hours, unnoticed. The majority of passersby walk right past him, without glancing upward. There are a few who look up and gape, but be it his clothing or because he is dangling 15 meters in the air, no one recognizes him.

Finally—as usually happens in fairy tales and allegorical fiction—a child who is distractedly looking about identifies him. The child stops and says:

“Mama, mama, the king is up there, hanging on a rope.”

The mother, who is in a hurry, tugs his hand and scolds him:

“Oh, please! Don’t make up such stories!”

The child offers some resistance and doesn’t let her drag him along.



“It is the king!”

“From which fairy tale?” asks the mother, who deals with her son’s obstinacy by playing along.

“The one who handed over the trophy last night in the football match!”

The mother pauses for a moment, forms a visor with her hand, and squints her eyes, looking up. It is truly he. There is no doubt: it is the sovereign by divine right. The woman can’t contain her euphoria and rushes to get out the word among the passersby. Curiosity spreads and soon, a considerable crowd gathers around the woman who is pointing with her index finger towards the sky.

The first journalists take fifteen minutes to arrive. The municipal police, half an hour. The civil guard, forty-five minutes. And, after an hour, the riot police arrive, who cordon off the area so that the king can work in peace.

From the other side of the street, a horde of people begins to chant the name of the king. The sovereign, who until now hadn’t let himself be distracted, decides to make a concession: he tucks the drill into the tool belt that hangs from his waist and lifts his hand to greet the people. The multitude applauds him.

The king takes up his work again. With patience, he inserts the plastic tacks in the holes he had just drilled—some don’t fit on the first go round and he has to hammer them in. Right after, he screws in the clamps, which serve to attach the metal piping to the façade. Once he has the new gutter installed, he proceeds to remove the old one.

The old gutter is a zinc cylinder that is affixed to the façade

with iron rings embedded in the wall. To remove them, in normal conditions one would have to use a hammer and chisel; but in this case, if the monarch chipped away at the wall, he could do damage to the moldings on the façade, and furthermore, it would be necessary to repaint. To avoid this problem, the king has brought a circular saw.

The monarch uncovers the saw and attaches a serrated blade. Little by little, he cuts the zinc pipes in sections. Every piece that he removes falls to the ground. Smashing into the stone slabs in front of the palace, the zinc creates a rabid spectacle, which the crowd celebrates with long applauses.

When he finishes, the king slides down the rope. Once on the ground, he unhooks his carabineers, takes off his harness, greets the clamorous multitude, and enters through the palace portico.

\* \* \*

The repercussions in the media from the king's actions are instantaneous. The broadcasts of all of the national news channels begin the evening edition with images of the changing of the palace gutters. The press echoes the television news, although they more carefully construct their headlines so as not to offend the Crown. The two newspapers with the highest circulation title their stories like this: King Dons Working Clothes and King Kicks Off Palace Reno. Both newspapers use the same cover photograph: an image of the sovereign suspended from a rope at a dizzying height. The

difference: in the photo of the leftist paper, the monarch drills into the wall; in the right-wing paper, he greets the multitude.

In every city and every town of the nation, people comment on the news. The country spends the night on high alert. People pour out of their houses and engage in conversations at every street corner. The opinions are diverse; the hypotheses, multiple. But everyone agrees on one point: the citizenry deserves an explanation.

Throughout the night, various representatives of civil order and the leaders of the military try to establish contact with the Royal Palace. From their different parliamentary groups and from the military bases in major cities, countless telephone calls are made. The former demand answers and explanations; the latter, instructions and orders. All, indistinctly, receive the same reply: the number you have dialed is disconnected or out of service.

At four in the morning, finally, the first public communication from the press cabinet of the Royal House is made in which it is proclaimed: "The king, through his participation in a secular activity, has demonstrated his desire to pay symbolic homage to all of the workers of the country." This communication has been drafted and distributed without the consent of the king, who has stayed at the margins of the agitated political situation. In fact, the monarch has been sleeping for five hours, and has given explicit orders to not be awoken under any circumstance because the following day he has to get up early to fix the air conditioning units on the terrace.

The communication from the Royal House is breaking news. In the press and on newscasts, no one speaks of anything else. The report has multiple effects. To begin with, the social forces of the country react immediately and mobilize. The main unions call a meeting and draft a manifesto, in which they declare their unconditional adherence to the monarchy. For the first time since the current royal dynasty is in command, it seems like the working class identifies with the figure of the king.

\* \* \*

The king has breakfast in the kitchen. He eats slices of bread that he himself has toasted and topped with olive oil, even after the timid complaints made by the chamberlain, who wanted to prepare him breakfast. The monarch tilts the brandy bottle and pours a trickle of Carlos III in the coffee cup. He stirs his spiked beverage with a teaspoon.

“Today, at midmorning, I will finish checking out the air conditioning units on the terrace,” the king says. “With that done, the work that needs to be completed around the palace will be finished. Understood?”

“Yes, your majesty,” answers the chamberlain, bowing.

“I don’t want you to take this badly,” the king continues, “but when the renovation was done a few years ago, the exterior gutter also needed to be changed.”

“No, your majesty, I don’t take it badly.”

“And the water meter...what a disgrace!”

The chamberlain lowers his head, visibly affected.

“Now, if it’s not too much to ask, can you do me a favor?”

“No, your majesty, it’s not too much to ask. In fact, it’s my job.”

Well, look,” says the king as he bounces a few coins on the table, “if you can park my pick-up on Gran Via and pay the parking meter until twelve, you would make my day.”

\* \* \*

The repair of the terrace air conditioning units is televised live on the national channels and the majority of the private ones. The broadcast, in spite of its eight a.m. time slot, beats viewership records.

Nowadays, it can be said that the king’s popularity is through the roof. On YouTube, in just twenty-four hours, the video of the sovereign working away has climbed to the top of the charts, tripling the number of views of the second-place video: a crocodile chasing a tourist in the jungle. In other news, related URLs have been snatched up by opportunist technophiles and on the web, multinationals bid in fierce auctions for [www.theplumberking.com](http://www.theplumberking.com) and other similar pages.

The uproar provoked by the new image of the monarch is making waves in every sector. In the fashion world, for example, leading designers are already brainstorming new styles because they know that the first brand to adapt the blue overalls to street wear will make a mint. In political spheres,

needless to say, everyone is all in. Even dyed-in-the-wool anti-monarchists consider a little truce to come to terms with a new phase of revisionism.

\* \* \*

The grand revolution, however, ends soon after. Everything happens in quick succession. An aerial shot filmed from a helicopter shows TV viewers how the king makes his breakfast, sitting on the roof tiles, with his back against the mansard roof.

The king splits a loaf of bread and places it on his lap. Next, he opens a can of tuna and spreads it over the bread. Next, he opens another can, this time of olives—a close-up shows they’re stuffed with anchovies. He grabs the olives one by one, distributing them over the tuna equally so that each bite has one olive. When he’s finished preparing the sandwich, he puts it on a kitchen towel he has laid out behind him. Then, in one fell swoop, he stands up, grabs his tools and walks across the roof. A camera follows his movement with a crane shot. When the king stops, the mechanical arm remains immobile. The king looks at the camera and says:

“I’m going to the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

The king walks through the small door that leads to the palace attic and goes inside the building. The crowd gathered in the plaza—following along on giant screens that have been installed—applauds.

The scene shows the sandwich and then zooms out,

converting the sandwich into a tiny white dot in a sea of roof tiles. Some television channels take advantage of the pause to show a brief advertisement until the sovereign reappears.

But the king doesn't come back. In fact, he never lets himself been seen again on camera. Or at least that's what he leads TV producers to believe. The camera crew is now incapable of paying attention to a man who is walking out of the palace through the front door. It is a man who is dressed in jeans, a vest, a winged hat, and sunglasses. In his left hand, he is carrying an oversize duffel bag. In his right hand, he spins a pen with which he has just left a note:

*The palace meter needs to be changed. There are late payments to be made.*

