

# FROM AFAR FOREVER

by NICOLÁS MIHOVILOVIĆ

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## TÍO JUAN

I don't exactly remember the year or the month, but I do remember it was a Saturday. The fierce Magellanic wind had sprung up early on, almost at daybreak. It must have been about five in the morning when Mama took the fragrant golden loaves of bread out of the old Dover stove. Things were not as she would have liked them to be, but still, she

seemed content. The wind roared across the roof and pulled at the stove's flames, which rushed up the stovepipe, hissing like a blowtorch. The black tin stovepipe—polished every week with a special wax—turned red-hot.

My father's heavy footsteps made the floor creak as he waited for his shaving water to boil. He had penetrating gray eyes and an impressive brown handlebar moustache. He kept humming a popular little waltz, the inevitable Tuscan cigar<sup>1</sup> between his lips. From our vantage point, he seemed gigantic.

With a finality that showed he had been thinking about this problem for a long time, Papa said, "It won't last beyond this summer. All the boards will have to be replaced. I could go through the floor at any moment."

Above the howling of the wind you could hear the rain starting to slam against the planks of the walls and the roof. The stove spewed out puffs of coal smoke. Mama remarked, "All the fire's going up the stovepipe! If this storm doesn't let up, I won't be able to roast the chicken." Then, without missing a beat, she shouted at the youngest boy, "Zvonko, stop that! No snitching hot bread! You'll get a bellyache!"

The boy trotted off contritely and went to press his forehead against the cold windowpane, but the unbridled fury of the rain and the wind pounding against the glass frightened him. Shuffling his feet, he climbed onto the woodbox next to the stove.

There Mama handed him a mug filled to the brim with hot milk, mixed with a dash of brewed coffee, and a thick slice of the bread, by now sufficiently cool. The three-year-old sucked up his snot and smiled; he dipped the bread into the steaming mug and, before Mama could prevent it, had made a big mess. She patiently took away his mug, made him blow his nose into her immaculate handkerchief, tied a bib of imposing dimensions around his neck, and let him have his fun with breakfast. We, the four older ones, at our designated places around the table, watched, somewhat enviously, how our little brother stuck his hand into his mug, oblivious of the "teaspoon rule," and was allowed to slouch rather than sit upright like a fence post on one of our wooden chairs, which was made—like all the chairs in the house—to withstand our father's 120 kilos.

At six Papa went to open the door of our corner *boliche*.<sup>2</sup> Precise like a stopwatch, the first customer of the day was Oyarzún, a native of Chiloé Island,<sup>3</sup> a dark-

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<sup>1</sup> A Tuscan cigar was thick in the middle and tapered at both ends. It was customary to cut it in half to make two cigars out of one.

<sup>2</sup> Small general store, usually located on a street corner.

<sup>3</sup> Main island of the archipelago by the same name, located off the coast of Chile, 1,300 kilometers to the north of Punta Arenas. Due to the prosperity of Punta Arenas—a required stop for all ships traveling

skinned, stocky cart driver with a droopy black moustache. He never failed to stop by early each morning to buy a pack of cheap cigarettes before settling down at the counter to have a brandy prepared “the Austrian way.”

The exchange with Oyarzún was my father’s first conversation each day and, unquestionably, as important to him as our daily bread. The conversation was comfortable: Papa did all the talking, and Oyarzún listened with exaggerated attention, knowing full well that after the first glass, the “Austrian”<sup>4</sup> would pour him half a glass free of charge. Once Oyarzún had again taken his place in front of his oxen, and the cart, overloaded with large pieces of split lumber, had moved off, swaying along the wide, deserted street, Papa would have a quick drink and return to our kitchen.

The four of us older boys were ready to go out: we had our canvas bags, and our shoes were shined. Here and there, a new patch graced our pants. Papa gave us the once-over: nails, hair, gloves, caps, buttons...

That stormy morning, as on so many other occasions, we walked along hanging from my father’s arms in a cluster, clinging to him as to something indestructible, something considerably more powerful than the fury of the eighty-kilometer-per-hour wind that was trying to drag us to the very sea.

From the hillside where our house stood, it was the sea that greeted us as we came through the door; we always stopped briefly to look at it. That morning the bay was boiling with foam. The smaller boats were dancing a furious jig, moored to their buoys, and the larger ships—one English, one Greek, two German, and a Navy revenue cutter—were riding out the storm at a distance, almost lost in a mist of seawater raised by the hurricane.

That Saturday the sea acquired a special meaning. For about a month now we had known that this was the day Tío Juan—Barba<sup>5</sup> I’ve as we heard him called at home—was to arrive from Europe. But unless the storm subsided, no ship would be able to enter the port. Papa scowled, the tips of his moustache disheveled by the wind and soaked with rain. He muttered a curse; then, as if to soften his words and turn the whole

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between the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans prior to the construction of the Panama Canal—natives of the Chiloé archipelago migrated South and settled in Punta Arenas and adjacent areas.

<sup>4</sup> In Chile’s Magellanic region South Slavic immigrants—mostly Croats, who had come to the area at the time their homeland was under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—were often referred to as “Austrian,” a name with a more or less pejorative connotation.

<sup>5</sup> “Uncle” in Croatian.

thing into a joke, he added two slightly more innocuous expressions, one Croatian and one Spanish: "*Bogami. Mierda.*"<sup>6</sup>

The school was almost deserted. (Not many people believed you absolutely could not skip class unless you were sick.) Señorita Julia, our teacher, had brought her harp. That morning she taught us singing until eleven; then, seeing that the weather was not improving, she let us go half an hour early. One by one, she helped us into our overcoats, put on our caps and gloves, and saw to it that our satchels were secure; she told the older children to take care of the younger ones, made us cross ourselves, and held the door half open so we could leave.

Tossed about by the wind, splashing through puddles, bent low so the blinding cold rain wouldn't sting our eyes, we struggled up the steep grade. Our house was barely four blocks away; nonetheless, a moment came when we simply couldn't go any farther: the onslaught of the rain was choking us. We turned our backs to the wind until we had caught our breath; then we tried to continue uphill, sliding in the mud. Alexander, the youngest in the group, stopped dead and, clutching at a picket fence, started to cry. My other two brothers followed suit. Never had I felt so helpless. It was terrible! The four of us huddled together like four abandoned chicks. For the first time in my life I understood that even children could die. The rain had drenched us. With our arms thrown around each other, shaking not so much from the cold as from fear, all four of us were crying. Suddenly the wind ripped off my cap. I tried to run after it, slipped, and fell in the mud.

Almost at once I felt myself being lifted up by a powerful grip. It was Oyarzún. I smiled at him despite my tears, despite the mud that covered me. He said, "All right, 'little Austrian,' lend me a hand with your brothers." One by one, he lifted us onto the now empty cart, on its way back to the hills, straining against the savage storm.

Oyarzún's poncho was dripping with water, his moustache droopier than ever; there was no way he could light his cigarette. Crouched next to us on the rickety floor of the cart, he called to his oxen, "All right, Clavel, all right, Pampa. Today we'se goin' to get us a free drink... What did they send them kids to school for?"

Mama virtually tore us out of Oyarzún's arms and, in less than two minutes, had us all in bed, clay hot water bottles at our feet. With the ease that lets children leap straight from anxiety to the greatest happiness, we were very soon in an uproar, jumping from bed to bed. But Papa saw fit to look in on us and one glance of his reduced us to

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<sup>6</sup> "My God. Shit!"

the most profound silence. It seemed best to remain quiet, at least for a while. Through the thin partition we could hear the voice of the cart driver, rasping and unhurried as always: "Good thing them kids go to school, so they won't have to get screwed like the likes of me; but af'er all, when God makes a day fit for dogs, it's more better for Christians to stay home. You should've seen how hard your oldest tried to pull his little brothers uphill. He's got guts, that guy, he's got guts. But the smallest one, oh, my! He was actually dragging his satchel on the ground. Here's to you!"

A long silence followed. Then we heard two glasses clink. We knew that my father, at a loss for words, was choking back a tear.

At three o'clock the storm suddenly died down and the sun came out. My father, relieved, said sententiously, "There isn't a Saturday without sunshine." And then he added, pointing to Alexander and me, "You two are coming with me." He said this affectionately, as if he were awarding us a prize, or giving us a present.

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Leaving us off at the kiosk of the "Green Pier"—an obligatory destination for the inhabitants of Punta Arenas after Sunday mass and a place of great commotion every time a ship arrived—Papa, with the agility of an old sailor, jumped into the launch taking off to meet the steamer that had just come in and was anchored half a mile offshore. The hoarse hooting of the boat, and handkerchiefs waved in the distance, prompted the waving of handkerchiefs on the dock. There were some elegant ladies in high boots with white buttons, wearing wide-brimmed hats decorated with flowers. An old skinny cop nicknamed "Three Piers," three red stars on his sleeves and an enormous saber knocking against his calves, strutted back and forth as if he owned the whole jetty; a little white dog followed him everywhere.

Our eyes were on Papa, who, scorning the seats on the launch, remained standing, ramrod-straight and wide-legged on the small deck at the bow, holding onto his hat with his right hand and twisting his moustache with his left. The boat was pitching and rocking in seas still churning from the recent storm. We thought our father was heroic to sail in such a small craft, and we found it amazing that he stood as erect in the pitching boat as he did on solid ground.

The launch disappeared from view behind the ship flying the Italian flag. Old "Three Piers" by now felt that he owned the entire bay and started explaining to all who cared to listen that because the sea was still very rough, the launch was being brought alongside on the lee of the steamer, where it would be better sheltered.

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Tío Juan limped slightly; he was tall and slender. His eyes were blue, his hair blond, and he had a sad smile. He sported a tiny trim moustache that seemed comical to us. He did not wear a tie. His jacket was too short and his pants too tight. His yellow shoes creaked at every step, one shoe more than the other. He carried a black suitcase and a coffee-colored canvas bag, doubtlessly too big for its contents.

Once more we hung onto Papa like a cluster of grapes and left the pier. Our uncle followed behind, struggling with his luggage and his limp. We boys had to run to keep up with our father's large strides. Papa stopped at the square at the end of the pier, next to the small tower and its clock—which marked the hours, days, and lunar phases—and looked around. We saw a string of carriages, their tops up, hitched to droopy-eared horses, attended by anxious cabbies waiting for passengers. We climbed into the carriage that was fifth in line. The coachman was Papa's cousin. We called him Barba Jule.

After Tío Juan had been introduced and polite greetings exchanged, we listened all the long way home to a novel type of conversation, made up of memories and events from a far-off world, a world that was strange and yet ours. Tío Juan admired my sturdy shoes, impervious to water and snow, and compared them to the cheap, lightweight footwear "back there," the *opanke*<sup>7</sup> made from untanned goat hide. Mama had often mentioned them.

I eyed the suitcase and the canvas bag the long-awaited Tío Juan had brought to America and mused that more than one surprise might emerge from there. Uncles who visited our house always brought something for their nephews. Given that this one had come from a place so far away, I wondered, how much more might he have brought?

That night our gathering didn't break up until late. Even Barba Jule stayed on after the grilled chicken and the delicious applestrudel to savor a glass of the *prošek*<sup>8</sup> Tío Juan had brought from his native land.

By that time I was already in bed under a mountain of blankets, trying not to fall asleep so I could keep listening to the lively conversation. It was very late when I heard

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<sup>7</sup> Peasant shoes without heels, often with a pointed tip, the top woven of leather strips, covering the foot completely.

<sup>8</sup> Sweet aged wine.

my father get up from the table to light the paraffin streetlamp; finally he bolted the door. I fell asleep at dawn.

On Sunday morning, when we were getting ready to have breakfast—coffee with hot milk and fresh bread with clotted cream—we heard Tío Juan's halting steps; he appeared, carrying a little parcel, which he put in the center of the table, saying, "*Dobro jutro*. Good Morning." Mama undid the white cloth wrapping and took from it a small, pungent goat cheese, which she kissed, strangely moved, just as she kissed her bread when it came out of the oven. Turning to my father, she asked him to divide the cheese among us. At that time I didn't understand all the fuss about some cheese I didn't even like because it made my tongue burn.

After that Tío Juan pulled out of his odd jacket a package of almond candy and gave us each a piece. The candy was delicious, but it seemed our uncle had a sweet tooth himself, because he didn't give us any more.

We went to eight o'clock mass with Mama (we'd got up too late to make it to the earlier one), and by half past nine we were back, ready to help with the chores. Papa and Tío Juan went out, and we didn't see them again until noon, when they came home to have lunch.

Mama had prepared gnocchis and an excellent roast. Even little Zvonko had been pulled up to the table in his high chair. Protected by his huge bib, he sucked at his piece of meat with relish until he had reduced it to shreds. These he threw on the floor, totally indifferent to the hard work the rest of us had endured to make it shine.

Tío Juan spoke nervously and asked many questions. He was concerned about quickly finding a good job so he could save some money and return home. Evidently he thought Punta Arenas wasn't a town where he'd like to stay for good. People spoke an incomprehensible language and lived in absurd houses built out of tin, lined on the inside with thin sheets of wood. By contrast, "over there" everything was built of solid stone. Here there were neither fig trees nor grapevines, neither olive trees nor flowers. You had to walk in the mud, along streets full of potholes and puddles; drunkards, and ugly dirty people everywhere.

My mother kept a discreet silence. Maybe she agreed with her brother. My father coughed to clear his throat, which was irritated from all his smoking, and said, "We all came here thinking the streets were lined with gold, that all you had to do was to fill a sack and return to our Dalmatia, to our village and to our wonderful climate. But then, one day, we see ourselves surrounded by children, by friends who once were strangers.

We look at the sea, which is always present, ready for us to take off whenever we feel like it, and suddenly we're in no hurry to go back. Over there you have the same old people, the same eternal stones, without the slightest change, just as we left them. Here, on the other hand, you see something new every day, because this is a new land and every day we marvel a bit at this newness. You work hard, but you've got something to show for it. You build a little house; when it begins to feel cramped, you enlarge it. You put some lettuce seeds in the ground; no sooner do the seedlings come up than the wind destroys them for you; so you remind yourself you're a man and keep on sowing, one, two, even three times. In the end, one day you'll be eating lettuce and realize you're tasting victory. Back home you'll keep on singing the same songs, hearing the same voices, looking at the same clouds. Yes, all of that is beautiful, but we left it behind, because we felt the scenery and the atmosphere and, above all, existence itself to be confining. Back home you can enjoy life; here you actually live it. I'm saying all this, because that's what I truly believe."

If Mama and Tío Juan thought differently, they kept it to themselves. Mama looked at her brother questioningly, but he either couldn't find an answer or didn't care to say what was on his mind.

My father, to relieve the tension, offered him a cigar, and soon the whole house was filled with tobacco smoke.

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Tío Juan spent the entire week visiting or receiving visits from relatives and compatriots, which at times cheered him up and at times made him sad. Occasionally I had to accompany him so he wouldn't get lost in the unfamiliar streets. He walked in silence, slowly, so his slight limp wouldn't be noticeable, looking about as though he were waiting to glimpse something worth seeing. And so another Sunday rolled around.

Toward nine o'clock that morning Papa, impeccable in his black suit, his watch chain draped across his belly, his tie held by the clip studded with a gold nugget, filled two small glasses with *rakija*<sup>9</sup> and invited Tío Juan to have some salted sardines and hot bread. After the men had a second drink, we all went out to the square.

A lot was going on there. The central kiosk (a sort of gazebo with windowpanes, topped by a flat cupola shaped like a meringue) had been moved to one side. Now it covered up one of the four fountains that marked each of the four cardinal directions, and there the Magellan Battalion Band was playing, making more noise than music.

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<sup>9</sup> A type of brandy made from grapes (also called *grappa*).

The center of the square was now to be the site of a monument to the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan, who four centuries ago sailed the strait that now bears his name to unite the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. He reached the Philippines, where he died in a rain of arrows, making it possible for a Spanish ship to claim the glory of circumnavigating the globe for the first time. It was he who had baptized the region Tierra del Fuego in honor of the bonfires lit by the Ona Indians along part of his daring southern route; it was likewise Magellan who had named Patagonia<sup>10</sup> for the unusually large prints left in the snow by the guanaco-hide footgear of the Tehuelches.<sup>11</sup>

Rumor had it that the monument would be extremely tall and that the first strong gust of wind might topple it. In any case, the hole dug for the base was considerable—wide and deep enough to hold a whole house. A compact fence of thick planks had been put up to prevent anyone from falling into that huge pit. My father explained to Tío Juan what was going on, but evidently our uncle was thinking of other, faraway matters.

The clock struck ten. From the steeple came the cold chime of bells—brief, penetrating sounds—followed, at the end of a discordant peal, by three bronze strokes announcing High Mass.

For me this mass was like a party. The warm, well-lit church seemed like a different place from the cold, dark church of the seven o'clock mass to which our mother usually took us. Tirelessly recited rosaries and the throng of old women receiving communion dragged out that early service for what seemed an eternity; to make matters worse, there always were several somber-looking priests, stiffly emerging from the cubicles of the confessionals.

High Mass, on the other hand, began with music; you could hear the hum of voices. The male members of the congregation entered with energetic steps, many of them staying in the back of the nave, near the portals, surreptitiously looking at the women. Here was Don Pedro, the baker; Uncle Jozo, Kum<sup>12</sup> Jakov, and another dozen and a half of our friends and relatives. They all affected carefully combed moustaches, carried themselves rigidly like poles, necks unbending, and wore their inevitable black Sunday suits with flamboyant ties; the most daring ones wore shoes of colored leather. All of them—as if to celebrate their Dalmatian origin—sporting flowers in their

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<sup>10</sup> Land of the large feet.

<sup>11</sup> Land dwellers of Patagonia, a region of southern Chile and southern Argentina.

<sup>12</sup> Close friend, best man, or godfather (in this case the latter).

buttonholes, and most of them held their hats at chest level. I amused myself by comparing these hats. There were broad-brimmed hats, hats with wide or narrow bands, hats with flat or high crowns, hats made of felt or velvet, even a few bowlers. The most distinguished among them was the brilliant pearl gray hat of the elegant Barba Marko Radojković. Among that Sunday's crowd I noticed two officers with their long buttoned-up frock coats, tightly fitting black pants, and boots pointed like knives. There were people of all social classes whom I did not know, but I did recognize the children of the rich Spaniards of our town. My whole life I'd been hearing talk about the Menéndez, Campos, and Montes families and several others I got mixed up, because I had also heard Swiss, French, English, and German surnames: apparently they were all well-to-do burghers. By contrast, we "Austrians" and Italians were poor, although a few of us were beginning to put on airs of prosperity. Those successful ones no longer attended mass. Instead they strolled around the square just like the Protestants, the two or three "Turkish"<sup>13</sup> vendors of fabric trims and lengths of cashmere, and an occasional Jew who, having spent his Saturday praying, now had to spend his Sunday walking about to no purpose, enviously examining and reexamining the handsome mansions that surrounded the square.

The sound of the organ and my curiosity made mass go by quickly. I was especially amused by the hat of a lady sitting quite far in front, in one of the first rows. A lady could never, for any reason, sit among the men, just as it was forbidden for the men to sit on the right side of the nave, reserved for the women. That's why the bachelors preferred to hang out in back, where the demarcation line was blurred in a free zone of benches and *prie-dieus*. The hat that had caught my eye was purple and had little veils, lace, flowers, and other trimmings I couldn't make out exactly. It occupied the space of three persons, and its owner—or, rather, the lady owned by the hat—couldn't move her head a fraction of a centimeter for fear of knocking against the hairdos of her neighbors, covered by black mantillas. It was quite obviously an irreverent hat, and to it were riveted fifty pairs of eyes belonging to the males crowding around the church doors in the rear.

The final chords of the organ roared thunderously. Thanks to the efforts of the sexton, the great central portal opened wide as if by a miracle, and the worshippers slowly made their exit. The dandies from the back unhurriedly filed out to the vestibule and, taking up positions on both sides, allowed the rest of the congregation to pass. My

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<sup>13</sup> These "Turks" actually came from various Arab countries and had emigrated to avoid being subjects of the Ottoman Empire.

father, my uncle, and I walked right through the center and stopped on the sidewalk, next to the people who had finished their stroll around the square. The large hat approached, undulating above the heads of the crowd. Tío Juan stood on tiptoe in his yellow boots while my father twisted his moustache, looking down calmly from his height.

The lady passed by us. My father took off his hat and bowed slightly. The lady returned his greeting with a nod and a trace of a smile. Fifty angry pairs of eyes glared at my father. Many bit their moustaches, disgusted.

Once back home, my father talked about the incident, laughing merrily: “They looked like fools, and when I told them I’d had this woman sitting on my knees, they almost went berserk.” But it was true. Fifteen years back, when this elegant lady—the one who now turned the heads of all the bachelors in town—was a little girl, she had indeed sat on my Papa’s lap. At the time, he was paving the courtyard at the French Consulate. The little girl was the consul’s daughter. This was the first time I saw my Tío Juan laugh so hard that tears came to his eyes.

Occasionally Papa said something conceited and disconcerting; but he knew that if the courtyard needed repaving, he’d be the one to be called.

We had a cheerful lunch. Even Mama was joking and talking animatedly, telling her brother amusing episodes and reminiscing about their childhood. We listened intently. We barely understood any of it, but one thing was certain: this was a beautiful day in every way. Outside the sun was shining. The chickens were having a great time, pecking about for worms. The dog dozed next to his doghouse. You could hear the sound of a scratchy phonograph from next door.

Around two o’clock that afternoon, Tía Keka arrived with her five lads. The oldest was already in long pants, but the others, like us, wore sailor suits, our Sunday best. There were enough sailors to man a warship, though our cousins’ suits were navy blue, and ours gray; to be sure our collars and cuffs had three stripes, while theirs had only two.

The sun had dried the sidewalk, so my father brought out several of those forbidding chairs, barely softened by the frilly cushions my mother had crocheted. The grown-ups sat on them, and our Tía Keka showered her cousin Juan with questions. In a voice he tried to keep calm, Juan told her how the folks of Brač<sup>14</sup> were getting poorer and poorer; how the vines were yielding less and less and how the olive groves produced smaller and smaller olives; how the war had embittered everyone, because

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<sup>14</sup> One of ten larger Dalmatian Islands located off the port of Split.

there wasn't a family that had not lost a son or, even worse, did not have to take care of an invalid.

At one point his eyes filled with tears and he remained silent, while Mama and Tía Keka sighed and exclaimed almost simultaneously, "Holy Mother of God!"

I looked at my father. Removed from all of us, he glumly chewed on his cigar. This powerful man, too, was on the verge of tears. He got up abruptly and went indoors.

None of this made sense to us children. The younger ones ran around playing tag. My older cousin, the one with the long trousers, challenged me to a race, and off we went, down the street. When the race ended in a tie, my cousin claimed that the tight-fitting long johns he was forced to wear had prevented him from being the undisputed victor.

Later we played ball. The game was closely watched by our mothers, who were probably thinking about the work facing them that night: cleaning and ironing our sailor suits to make them presentable the following Sunday.

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At four we were all seated around the table for the important hour of afternoon coffee. The tablecloth, as resplendently white as an altar cloth, almost disappeared under the flowery cups, the big breadbasket in the center, and half a dozen dishes and trays holding biscuits, *pršurate*, *hrštulas*,<sup>15</sup> a gigantic strudel, rhubarb jam, and a cake decorated with shredded coconut and multicolored candy.

We, the sailors, felt our uniforms demeaned when our mothers, to prevent cocoa stains from ruining the outfits, insisted on tying vulgar square bibs around our necks. That's when my older cousin adjusted his tie and looked at me insultingly. But oh, divine justice! He would be the only one to get slapped that day for having dirtied the lapel of his brand-new suit jacket. Now *I* was entitled to a mocking smile, but I preferred to pretend this was not my concern and to keep on stuffing myself and guzzling cocoa like the rest of the kids. Meanwhile the adults drank coffee and chatted animatedly.

Clearly, Tío Juan was the guest of honor. At a certain moment, he got up ostentatiously and, with unexpected speed, limped to his room, at the end of the passageway, near the pantry at the far end of the house. He came back with the little

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<sup>15</sup> *Pšurate*: round fritters made with mashed potatoes, grated apples, flour, raisins, prunes, walnuts, orange peels, cinnamon, brandy, and malt liquor. *Hrštule*: knot-shaped fritters made with eggs, sugar, flour, and either vanilla or liquor.

package I recognized: the almond sweets. Emptying them on the table, he said in his language (the same language we prayed in every night), "That's all I have left."

In one instant Tío Juan had become the poorest man in the world. But did we care? It was much too enjoyable to be chewing on those sweets and, in the end, to come up with a whole almond.

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For us children the next few days went by with unaccustomed rapidity: we gulped down our meals in a hurry, made short shrift of our homework, and barely went outside to play with the neighborhood kids. Tío Juan had become the center of all our curiosity and fantasy. A good narrator, he kept telling his sister about the many events that had occurred in her native village since she had left it fifteen long years ago, about the vineyards, the olive groves, and so on and so on. The war had been the worst of it. In Pučišća, as in all villages of Brač, even boys of sixteen were drafted into the army. Many of them did not return and lay buried under wooden crosses in foreign lands. Others, like him, had been luckier. They were wounded at the outset of the conflict and became prisoners of the French. Walking with a limp, or even losing an arm, was a small price to pay for staying alive.

Many nights I heard the roar of cannons and the explosion of grenades and saw soldiers die the way a boy imagines that soldiers die: with the flag raised on high, uniform buttons polished, a red spot over their hearts. Upon awakening, I heard the uneven gait of my uncle and recalled what he had said about the fleas and the rats, which ate them alive in the trenches, and at that moment war no longer seemed so glorious.

Sometimes, after lunch, my father and Tío Juan would get entangled in an exchange where the word "no" abounded and voices were raised. My mother would intervene on the pretext of having to clear the table, so the discussion would not turn into an argument. Papa, chewing on his cigar, would go off to the store. He'd sit down near the door on his massive chair and, unfolding his newspaper, would hold it so that it hid him completely. I wasn't all that sure that he was actually reading it; after all, he'd already read this same paper very early that morning.

Two weeks later Tío Juan moved to a boardinghouse, where he lived with fellow countrymen who were also fellow bachelors. He came to lunch the next Sunday. His expression, which normally tended to be somewhat sad, was radiant: he was to start work at the slaughterhouse the next day. My father remarked that the job was hard but

that those who managed to get through the first week could earn a lot of money. It was work for young and strong people. My uncle was young. Papa toasted to him, wishing him good luck, and invited him to play bocce ball that afternoon.

I went with them. It was the first time my father had taken me to a gathering of grown-up men. Here was my chance to find out whether it was true! And it was. My father didn't disappoint me. Although Tío Juan and the others didn't do a bad job, there was no one capable of positioning the rolling ball close to the target jock, the *pollino*, with my Papa's precision. He made only one single mistake all afternoon; indeed, every time my father hit the ball of his opponent, he dislodged it so completely that the other player felt like giving up.

After interminably discussing each questionable move and calling down the power of all the saints of heaven in an uproar of shouts, the players fell completely silent the moment anyone was rolling a ball.

Suddenly something happened. One of the men watching the game whistled loudly, and, as if obeying a command, everybody left the court and went into the clubhouse. There they took their seats around a large table on which stood four enormous wine jugs and two long rows of glasses. The manager's wife brought me lemonade and made me sit off in a corner. The men gulped down a couple of drinks in almost total silence. Some were wiping the sweat off their faces, and all were grumbling. Then someone's fist came down so hard on the table that the wine made waves in the decanters. "*Bogami!*"

And they all started talking at the same time. From what I could tell, a group of Spaniards, headed by a certain Nicanor García, had been watching the game with binoculars from a two-story house on the next street. "Spying" was the word used. The matter was considered so reprehensible that all Spaniards from the king on down, all Spaniards born and to be born, would have trembled before the epithets launched against their respective mothers in a volley of shouts, in which one could make out curses and blasphemies. "Take it easy, take it easy," advised Don Pablo Drpić, a slight and nervous old man with white hair and dark eyes. "Keep calm, fellows. We have two possibilities. The first is to play badly on purpose; the other's to build a brick wall eight meters high."

"Shut up, old asshole!" shouted a youth called Frane.

The insult was too coarse, even considering the charged atmosphere in the clubhouse, and the old man got up livid, though composed: "If I were your age and had

your strength, Frane, I would make you eat your words and your teeth. But I'll forgive you because you're young and foolish. What I want to say is simply this: you can't keep on training here within view of our rivals."

I looked at my father. The fizz of my lemonade was tickling my nose. Papa, having bitten off the tip of his new cigar and spat it out to one side, cleared his throat, lit up, exhaled a big mouthful of blue smoke, and said in a slightly tremulous voice: "Frane, first of all you're going to apologize to Don Pablo, or else... just bear in mind that what he can't do, I can do very well, if need be."

Frane, a tall, strapping guy, with curly blond hair covering his forehead, had a habit of moving his eyebrows in an odd manner. Getting up sheepishly, he stuttered: "Do-Don Pa-pa-blo, I'm so-sorry. I don't know wha-what I'm sa-saying."

"It's all right, son. I love you just as much as I do the rest of these fellows."

And the bitter smile of Don Pablo felt like a sort of benediction.

On the way home, my father did all he could to erase the impression I had received at the club; but when you're eight years old, words and gestures scar for life. For the first time I suspected that not all people were good.

I slept badly that night. I had a strange and distressing dream. A huge boccie ball came rolling downhill along the street, getting bigger and bigger until it became wider than the street itself and began to flatten the houses, crushing and absorbing them; finally, the street disappeared and the immense ball ended up in the sea with a tremendous splash that drenched the entire city.

I was woken by the sound of rain on the corrugated metal roof. The dawn was pale like the sad face of Don Pablo.

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A day later, Papa brought home a huge fish, and my mother immediately started to prepare it in a special, rarely used pot. I knew that the next day we would have *polenta*<sup>16</sup> with marinated fish, a dish to make your mouth water or, according to the picturesque Adriatic expression, *maza la brada*.<sup>17</sup>

Time rushed by. Each day was shorter and colder than the one before. We no longer could go outside in the afternoon to play ball or spin tops. In the morning the roofs were covered with hoarfrost, and the wooden curbs, edging the sidewalks, seemed

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<sup>16</sup> Cooked coarse cornmeal porridge of Italian origin.

<sup>17</sup> Literally, "juice dripping down your chin."

equally white and slippery. Winter would soon set in, with the joy of snow and the sadness of thaws and mud.

Tío Juan came to our house almost every day. He had turned thinner and paler, and even his limp had become more pronounced. He was waiting for the answer to a letter he had sent to Europe, but the answer did not come.

He would sit down, depressed, next to the black stove and once in a while would utter some brief and sad comment. My mother would look at him with tenderness, shaking her head, disheartened.

When the store did not claim his attention, Papa would come into the kitchen and, without saying a word, put his powerful hand on our uncle's shoulder. At this Tío Juan would cheer up a bit and smile wanly. Mama would start singing an ancient song with her gentle, caressing voice, full of emotion:

“Sinoć si mi rekla da ljubiš samo mene.. .”

[Last night you told me you loved no one but me...]

Soon our uncle would join in, singing along softly, with tears in his eyes:

“Evo ti prsten raćam, što si mi na dar dala,  
na kojem ti, malena, hvala, ljubav je prestala...”

[I'm returning the ring you gave me, my little darling,  
I'm not grateful to you, now that love has vanished...]

And so the long harsh winter went by.

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I did not know what a contract was until I saw Papa, Barba Jule, and Kum Grgo work on the road. In various carts, including the one belonging to Oyarzún, they hauled large quantities of stone and sand to the site. Toiling from sunup to sundown with picks and shovels, the men got a whole block ready. Using strings and levels they framed the sidewalks with long planks. They stopped work only briefly to have lunch; then, each equipped with a bottle of wine mixed with water, they continued their labor until nightfall. At the end of a day's work they put the tools away in a large lockbox, which was left in

the middle of the street, and placed a lit lantern on top of it to warn the public that the road remained closed to traffic. Barba Jule and Kum Grgo went downhill to their families, and Papa came home exhausted, dragging his feet.

The contract with the city stipulated that the work was to be finished in one month, and Papa worried that the days were still too short and the weather too unstable. “If it doesn’t rain we can finish on time. Otherwise...”

For us kids it was fun to see them work; often, after school, we tried to help by lugging a few stones. My father and his two countrymen, kneeling and holding heavy hammers, arranged the stones on a bed of sand. Every so often they would stand up, not to rest, but rather to ram the cobblestones with extremely heavy logs of hardwood, which were equipped with two handles to enable two men to bear down simultaneously. In the meantime the laborers from Chiloé piled up more sand and more stones, as if they begrudged my father and his friends one minute’s respite.

Every day, on arriving home, we saw the progress of the paving job; in the space of one week a whole block of cobblestones had been put down. Very soon after that, more than three blocks were ready. At that point, to save time, Papa decided that instead of eating at home, he would eat his lunch at the work site. So every day, on our way to school, we took him a pot wrapped in a white cloth, a loaf of fresh bread, and a bottle of wine, in addition to his obligatory ration of Tuscan cigars.

The contract was fulfilled exactly on time. One afternoon my father put on his Sunday best—watch chain draped across his chest, shoes well polished, and the tips of his moustache appropriately twisted—and went downtown, tightly holding onto his hat, so the wind, which was blowing in capricious gusts, would not rip it off his head. He was going to collect his hard-earned money.

That night the three partners, sitting in our kitchen, enjoying small glasses of *rakija* and some dried figs, divided up the money in three equal parts. Barba Jule said he would buy a horse to replace the old nag that was pulling his rental cab; Kum Grgo wanted to fix his place up a bit, to prepare for the possible courtships of his many daughters. My father had already decided to put in new floors throughout our house.

The newly paved street was inaugurated one Sunday at noon to the sounds of a band. Several gentlemen with top hats and double-breasted frock coats, accompanied by ladies in wide-brimmed hats, arrived by “motor car.” All the neighbors came out to look, most of them secretly hoping to see the car roll downhill. But this did not happen, even though the machine had been left unattended. Its driver, with visor cap and safety

glasses (“chauffeur” was the word I learned that day), had gone off to get a closer view of the dedication. In this ceremony a lady—wearing long gloves adorned by a row of diminutive buttons—used tiny gold scissors to cut a tricolor silk ribbon that had been stretched across the brand-new stone pavement. My father stood close by and answered the questions put to him by one of the dignitaries.

The playing of the band livened things up, and people were talking and shouting greetings to each other. One of the gentlemen—the mayor—took off his shining top hat, got a piece of paper out of his pocket, and began to read a speech. His words were whipped away by the breeze, which was becoming a whistling wind. My father looked up, and I followed his glance. Dark clouds were skimming across the sky and soon covered the sun. A strong gust of wind sent one of those elegant hats rolling along on the ground. Suddenly the squall struck.

At first there were snowflakes, then hail, and, after that, a downpour that scattered the entire crowd in seconds. The orator put away his speech and made for the car, gallantly allowing several ladies to precede him while he got pelted by the cloudburst; the huge drops of rain sonorously bounced off his top hat. The chauffeur put on his glasses and tried to start the motor. The motor spluttered once or twice, then stalled. No matter how hard the man cranked the handle, making the vehicle sway in the process, the car refused to budge. Pushing the curtains aside, the mayor stuck his head out and asked for a push. The driver leaped into his seat, and my father and his partners pushed until the motor started with uneven explosions. The car went downhill, bouncing over the recently inaugurated pavement. The rest of the official party climbed into their vehicles, and soon the rain had swallowed up the caravan. My father threw away his soggy cigar, burst out laughing, and, cramming on his hat, came to take me by the hand.

We arrived home soaked to the skin; a carefully prepared Sunday lunch was waiting for us. My father explained the roles of the mayor, governor, commissary of police—in short, of all the officials we had just encountered in that ill-fated ceremony. The event would be permanently etched in our minds, down to such details as the musicians’ rain-filled instruments and the dark color of their uniforms leaking onto their red collars and cuffs.

During the afternoon there were two or three more squalls, each one shorter than the preceding one, and around four o’clock the sun was shining once more. People came to take a look at the new street, and kids were running all over the place. My father, sitting by the entrance to his store, took stock of his work without hiding his pride

and released big puffs of smoke. Some of the passersby stopped briefly to chat with him. At about six Barba Jule and Kum Grgo showed up with their respective families: the girls bedecked with ribbons and frills, the boys with starched collars and bow ties, except for the youngest ones (in sailor suits, of course). The adults went indoors and left us to play tag and “cops and robbers” in the street.

It rained heavily that night; my father got up very early to check on how well the water was running along the gutters of the new street. Judging by the naughty little tune he sang as he was shaving, he was very pleased with his inspection.

A few days later the three partners had secured a new contract, this time to lay down a stone pavement in a distant section of town near the beach. They bought oxen and carts and hired many laborers. Papa offered to teach Tío Juan the trade, an offer the latter accepted gladly: only in this way could he save the money he needed to return to his homeland.

Once again Tío Juan came to live with us, although we saw very little of him because he and Papa got up at the crack of dawn and didn't return until nightfall, when we children were already in bed. Only on Sundays did we go for a walk, invariably ending with my father's inspection of the work site. There, in the middle of the street, under a tent next to the gigantic toolbox, was Oyarzún, the cart driver, who was admirably suited for his new role as *guachimán*.<sup>18</sup>

The Chiloé islander prepared *café carretero*. He boiled water in a small pot over an open fire, threw in two enormous spoonfuls of ground coffee, and let the mixture simmer for a while. Next he removed the pot from the fire and, taking a burning log, immersed it briefly in the brew. After the coffee grounds sank to the bottom, Oyarzún carefully poured the black liquid into some chipped enamel mugs. Everyone added sugar to taste, and it turned out to be delicious! My mother wouldn't have allowed me to have any, of course, but my father was teaching me how to be a man.

On the way home I asked many insistent questions, but received only vague answers from my father. Tío Juan smiled and talked little, but his limp seemed slighter.

The new pavement contract, too, was a success, and Tío Juan found himself the owner of a fat wad of bills, which he counted twice under the store's paraffin lamp.

One Saturday, as we were finishing lunch, Papa and our uncle decided to take everybody for a boat ride on the bay. In our excitement, we acted so wild that our mother intervened with uncustomary energy. Realizing that we might not be allowed to go, we

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<sup>18</sup> Corruption of the English term “watchman.”

quickly calmed down and were soon marching downhill, as always, clustered around my father's imposing figure.

We walked to the beach along streets I didn't know. Next to the water we saw a line of boats turned on their sides on the sand. Papa examined each of them and picked out the best one, although to me they all seemed the same. He spoke to the owner, a plump and gesticulating Spaniard who launched at least three thundering curses before closing the deal. My father checked out the oars with the air of an expert, showing off a bit, and at last the three men pushed the boat into the water.

It was the first time I had seen the city from the sea; in fact, it was my very first boat ride. Yet this trip didn't seem strange to me at all. I was used to hearing my father tell about his past maritime adventures, so riding in a boat on a calm spring afternoon was something I had already done a thousand times in my imagination. Perhaps the only novelty was the squeaking of the oarlocks and the splashing of the water against the blades of the oars.

We passed a ship lying silently at anchor. It looked as tall as the mansions surrounding the square but smoke had dirtied it, and filth was pouring out of openings in its side. It was a *caponero*, a ship that came every year to pick up meat from the refrigerating plant. From this close, this ship seemed very different from the way it appeared to me every morning when I walked down the hill on my way to school. Gulls hovered nearby, alighting lazily on the greenish water.

I looked toward the city. Rows of one-storied houses climbed a gentle slope in a great open semicircle, and from them emerged a group of very high and beautiful buildings: the ones surrounding the square, and those along Roca Street, which led down to the sea... Farther back, the hill, with its iron cross—the Cerro de la Cruz—and more and more one-storied, red-roofed houses, painted in many different colors, in all some twenty blocks wide and about eight or ten blocks deep. The streets were wide and straight: Paraguaya, Boliviana, Independencia, Balmaceda, Errázuriz, Roca, Waldo Seguel, Valdivia,<sup>19</sup> Colón, Ecuatoriana,<sup>20</sup> Mejicana, Progreso,<sup>21</sup> Sarmiento... Piers jutted into the sea: for passengers, the "green" pier so well known to us, and then the two piers for cargo, gray, covered with coal dust, with rails that carried steam-operated cranes and hopper cars... and farther on, warehouses upon warehouses with large letters on their

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<sup>19</sup> Now "José Menéndez."

<sup>20</sup> Now "Ignacio Carrera Pinto."

<sup>21</sup> After World War II named "Yugoslavia", now "Croatia."

roofs: Menéndez Behety, Braun and Blanchard, Stubenrauch & Co. Beyond them, to the north and to the south, empty beaches and, at some distance in either direction, the dry docks, where shored-up ships had turned into strange structures lying at the mouth of rivers, lifeless, their boilers cold.

My father said it was a beautiful city, and for the first time Tío Juan agreed. They rowed slowly toward the beach. You could see the sandy bottom through the green water, and to our utter amazement, huge shoals of fish swam by.

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How many days we had to talk and fantasize! How marvelous was the sea, which had unveiled for us the essence of our land!

Those hills we gazed at that evening, as the sun set them aglow with red, purple, and violent orange, now seemed closer to us, more our own. Oh, what a beautiful land God had given us!