

THE COPYBOOK OF THE GREAT MASTER

By

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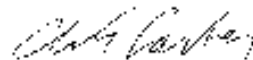
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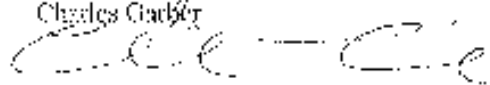
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Charles Gasker


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DEDICATION

To Leonor Bustamante, Leonor Calderón and Marco Antonio Bustamante, who somehow believed in me when nobody else did.

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ARTURO RUIZ ORTEGA

ABSTRACT

During Pinochet's Dictatorship in Chile, Osvaldo sneaks into a The Astrum Aureum Society, a secret group of adepts of the occult. As he learns the magic secrets, he begins to question the alleged wisdom, and also realizes that the immense network of the society is its real super power. Osvaldo is forced to keep the charade until he makes it to become the Great Master of the whole organization. However, when he achieves the ultimate leadership of the society, he is already completely skeptical about the secret arcana, and convinced of the iniquity of the Astrum Aureum Society. Therefore he writes a memoir on a copybook: the copybook of the Great Master.

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PRELIMINARY EXPLANATION

Roberto Brodsky said my book didn't respect the conventions of its genre. I didn't think about it as a *genre* book. *Los Pájaros Negros* (*The Black Birds*) was based on an old Chilean myth about some wizards who had the ability to become birds at night. It was true that it had some supernatural elements, but for me the book presented a vision of life. I wanted to think about the birds as elaborated symbols and metaphors, like Kafka's beetle – was it a beetle? That was the insect on the cover of the book I read. However, I didn't argue with him. After all he was presenting my book in Washington DC and in the most important Hispanic bookstore of the District: Pórtico Bookstore. Besides, Roberto was a great writer and having him present my book was an honor.

That was the beginning of a proper career at last. It isn't that I had had no success in my own country and even my small part of fame, but that didn't mean money and some people began to be more impatient than me. That moment at Pórtico was the end of my career as the eccentric cousin, the bad son, the freak relative, and the freak in general.

Part of me could not avoid listening to the advice of the family in general.

"Arturo, I think you should find a real job and use your spare time for writing." I don't know how many people told me this. Of course I did it: I owned a café and then a pub, but the pub finally went bankrupt and I was ruined. My therapist – yes I ended with a therapist – said that it was a self-sabotage because I didn't want to do what I was doing. Maybe he was right, but what I believed is that I

was just useless as entrepreneur. That night I was at the end of a very long trip, long in years, miles, and languages. I arrived to the land of professional writers, and I was a proper citizen. I didn't need to ignore what other people had to say anymore. I was ready to abandon the narcissistic cover that I had to believe as if it were the Catholic dogma, even though I never believed it. I didn't need more dogmas. I understood my former state as a war against the whole world. The strategy in that war was methodical narcissism. This consisted in the absurd belief in myself as if I was better than everybody else. Of course that belief did not make any sense. However, I acted as if I really believed that, even though I didn't buy it. I stole the idea from the methodical doubt of Descartes. He didn't believe there was a malign genius deceiving him, but he thought as if the genius was real. I finally had two teaching jobs directing literary workshops, and my book was in the bookstores. I won. As the methodical narcissism was not necessary anymore, I decided it was the time to start listening to what people had to say. They were saying good things about me at last. Well, I don't know if "genre writer" was a good thing, but it was not as bad as "writer wannabe," or "freak."

The launch of the book in DC was a quite an event. The Hispanic community was very active and my presentation was a good excuse for the Hispanics of the city to meet again. Brodsky's generosity is something for which I will be in debt my whole life. Pórtico Bookstore is on New York Avenue in downtown DC. The store is also a "joint adventure of IDB and Fondo de Cultura de México." That means that the owners of the bookstore are an international organization and the Government of Mexico. Therefore, the event had also diplomatic status. My embassy promised to

send a representative. Of course they didn't, but I was authorized to put the emblem of the embassy on the invitations and some of the other embassies did send their representatives.

That night, the streets were deserted as always after six thirty; the capital of the United States looked like a ghost town, and very proper for the presentation of a *genre* book: a book of horror. They served Chilean wine, of course, and also Argentinean in an act of Latin American unity and a Chilean act of treason: as proud wine producers, Chileans are not supposed to drink any foreign wine. However, that night most of the people drank without any political or patriotic concern. Yes, the war against the whole world was over: I had found my place in the world; therefore I thought that ignoring national loyalties was the proper way of drinking. Everything else we do is always full of political meaning. The ideas of a man can be judged by the way he dresses, and the ideas of a woman by the type of man she chooses. Only drinking can be sometimes apolitical.

There was never any writer who didn't like his own book's launch. There was someone important – like Roberto Brodsky – talking only marvels about one's work. I know some guys who suffer because they are naturally shy or afraid to talk in public, but that was definitively not my case. I have to admit that I really love being in the spot light for a while. Besides, after the whole thing was over, I would be back to my comfortable anonymity if I really needed it.

Roberto continued talking about his impressions and my disrespect of the conventions of the genre. I thought that was good. Nobody wants to be a

conventional writer. I could accept genre writer, but not conventional. He also said that he enjoyed the book and that was the bottom line: nobody wants to be boring.

After we both talked, people began to ask questions. As the war against the world was over, this time I listened. People happened to ask the strangest things of writers:

“What is the difference between your poetry and your fiction?” somebody asked, a woman in her fifties. I was surprised because the only thing I was doing with my poetry was putting it on a blog. Nobody bought poetry in Chile and the same group of guys normally won the contests. I don’t want to suggest that poetry contests are fixed in Chile; I want to say it clearly. Besides, poets didn’t like me because I was also a scriptwriter and a novelist, so I wasn’t pure enough for them. I used to be also a ghostwriter, but they didn’t know that; if they knew, they would think I was the equivalent of a whore. Well, I was. This, however, wasn’t my answer. I don’t remember what I told her. I hope I was clever enough.

“Are you always inspired by real life?” asked a young man who was barely old enough to be a man and not a boy. He was annoyingly young. He spoke Spanish, but his accent was clearly American. He was white, but the color of his skin meant nothing: Hispanics are not a race, just a linguistic community. My answer was the truth this time and I said yes, except for the idea of inspiration. I never knew what inspiration was supposed to be. Stories are there in real life and a writer is a good watcher more than a true creator.

One part of me would regret that sincere answer. I thought that a better profession for me would be being a physician, and I was not thinking about the

money, the prestige, or the security, but about another reason, something less obvious –as if there were not enough reasons to choose any other job. I am married to a doctor and when we are out with friends and acquaintances, they usually ask Leonor about their health, fears, and symptoms.

“I have this pain here,” or “I can’t sleep well,” or my favorite, “Is it normal to feel this or that thing?” were usually part of any conversation in which Leonor was involved. People always felt great relief when my wife said “That’s normal.”

Leonor always said that she didn’t like people asking questions and she was always complaining about it. She said that she was also human and she had also the right to her own spare time without being a physician. However, she was always giving advice and listening to people’s questions because she really cared about humanity. That’s why she became a doctor, I guess.

I envied her.

I envied her, because when people were not asking me answerless questions, they wanted to tell me *their* stories. That was the door I opened when I answered that young man with the truth.

“You could write a best seller with my story,” they usually said. I don’t remember exactly who said this that day, or better how many people said it after the presentation was finished.

I would like to have a Chilean peso for every time I have heard that sentence in English or Spanish. One dollar is about five hundred Chilean pesos, but I would be a millionaire anyway. Everywhere in the world, everybody was sure about being the only person who had an affair, a romantic adventure, or a broken heart. They really

thought their stories were unique and they expected a writer to be the one who brought them immortality. They desperately wanted the writer to rescue their ordinary lives and transform them into extraordinary ones. But neither I could do that, nor any other writer; the only person that could transform an ordinary life into an extraordinary one was the person who was living that life. People rather believed that writers had that power because that was easier than taking risks. Though I never shared this opinion, I had to be very respectful of it: the belief in a writer's superpowers was always a wonderful bookseller.

That night too many people reminded me that mortals are repetitive, clichéd and boring. I even thought it was to soon to end my war against the whole world. It was a hot night. The antiseptic white interior of the bookstore was properly air conditioned, but some people made me feel really suffocated.

As Roberto said that night, a writer is not someone looking for new stories, but someone who is looking for new meanings and points of view for the same old stories: boy meets girl, guy kills guy, guy envies other guy, etc. Between the Greeks and Shakespeare, all stories had been told already. My book was about an old Chilean legend situated in the contemporary world.

As I always stopped listening when someone told me that he or she had the best story, I began to listen when someone said that he knew a story of someone else.

"You should meet my father. He has quite a story!" said the young man who asked the question about reality and fiction.

If somebody forgot about himself to tell the story of another person, it was because that other person's story was really good. It has always been really hard to make people forget about themselves. Besides, a guy able to forget about himself for a moment used to be an interesting person. Not many people have learned to do this, and even for me it was something very difficult to do.

Normally I didn't mix with people as young as he was. He was less than thirty and I believed that being that young was disrespectful. Youth was by itself an insulting condition, even when it was not accompanied by its typical annoying characteristics like irreverence or impertinence. Youth always was an offensive display of power, beauty, health, and the lost possibilities for people my age. Besides, young people I met changed, and one could not be sure what they would become. I saw idealistic fighters for freedom turned into bourgeois rich men and I also saw the most virtuous girls turned into cougars. People turned into what they meant to be after thirty and before that moment in life, it was impossible to know what they would become.

The name of that young man was Norman and he was at the launch because he desperately wanted to recover his Chilean origins – this wasn't his name, of course. I made up most of the names here. Amazingly, we exchanged emails and a few days after we were celebrating the Chilean Independence Day at his place.

The Chilean community is small and except for Roberto, most Chileans in the DC area are not writers or artists of any kind. At Norman's place I realized that, a few years before, I had stopped being Chilean and become some kind of generic Hispanic. I also realized I loved things that way. Most of my friends were the

Salvadorian poets – who were not at my launch because, in a sad but unavoidable coincidence, they happened to present their anthology the same day. But all of them bought my book as I bought theirs. Leonor and I used to have a mere glass of wine for September 18, *el dieciocho*, or *Fiestas Patrias* as they call it in Chile. Sometimes I bought Chilean empanadas at Julia's Empanadas and that was enough for my nostalgia. I guess Brodsky felt the same, because he wasn't at Norman's house.

"He never celebrates *el dieciocho*" – Norman confirmed my suspicions with his international and alienated Spanish. I happened to like the guy, but I regretted being at his place for that specific holiday. There are powerful reasons to leave one's country, change one's language, and start again. After those decisions, a man doesn't want to go back.

Fortunately the ages of the people there went from Norman's baby daughter, Gabriela, to some people in their fifties. I didn't feel as alien as I feared I would when I accepted Norman's invitation in such an unthoughtful way. However, being among people talking in Spanish with the same accent I had was uncomfortable. Chilean Spanish had become a language of intimacy, only spoken by my wife and me at home. The Salvadorian poets spoke their own version of the language. Being surrounded by people talking exactly like me felt like an invasion of my intimacy.

Leonor was having a great time. She loved Norman's baby and quickly became friend with his wife Brenda. Brenda was an all-American girl who spoke Spanish better than her husband. Americans speaking a second language are rare, but when they do, they do it amazingly well.

It was as if Chile had found me in Maryland.

"Where did you go to school?" someone asked me, a woman in her forties. I don't remember her name.

"American University," I answered. "I was in the MFA program..."

"I mean high school," she corrected.

I told her about my fancy immersion school, Windsor School, and how it was responsible for my English. My school was almost socially perfect, except for the fact it wasn't in Santiago. She began to throw names, but I didn't recognize any of them. It didn't mean anything; I have no head for names.

"Maybe they were there too long ago," she lamented.

"Maybe," I answered. I was relieved. The obsession with where people went to high school was too Chilean for me. They asked in order to determine a person's social status in the most classist society of South America.

At some point, I was able to get some distance from the crowd and I started to contemplate the whole place. The red brick house didn't look that big among the enormous trees that surrounded the yard. Beside the long table of the barbecue, there was a plastic playground where some children were playing obsessively. Norman told me he bought it when Gabriela was born, though she needed a few years to start using it. I thought it was very singular for such a young couple to have a house like that. Many friends of my age didn't own houses that big – I didn't have any house anywhere, but that was because I was a kind of gypsy. Normally, if a guy of Norman's age had that kind of money, it was because he was a stockbroker or something like that. But this was not Norman's profession. For security reasons, I

cannot give more details about this particular, but his job didn't have any relation to finance.

Norman was clueless at his own party. It was because he was not Chilean at all, but for some reason he believed that being Chilean was cool. Chileans accepted him precisely because he was white, half-American, and looked like a Chilean spoiled rich kid. He had everything to win in the complicated Chilean society. His innocence about those dark aspects of my arriviste fellow citizens made him even more charming. I would like to explain him everything about the social differences, the cruel codes, and the infinite causes of social discrimination in Chile. However, I would have to write a book just for that and a guy already wrote it back in the country. It was a best seller.

Though he wasn't a spoiled rich kid, nor was Brenda, I wondered how it was that they were not living like guys their age. People in their mid twenties normally live in rented apartments and are working all the time. I know he was not a rich spoiled kid, because, unlike my fellow countrymen and especially countrywomen, there is nothing I hate more than a spoiled rich kid, and sadly I have a good nose for them: I don't like their smell.

Norman realized my isolation and came over to me.

"What's the matter, Arturo?" he smiled.

"Maybe everything is too Chilean for me," I answered.

"Do you feel nostalgic?" he asked.

"Not precisely," I said. "I feel as if the ghosts of my past came to haunt me again."

“What’s the matter with you, people?” Said Norman. “You sound exactly like my father or Brodsky. Are not you proud of being Chilean?”

Roberto had abandoned Chile after the death of Augusto Pinochet. That day people celebrated his death as if the national soccer team had won the World Cup. Roberto did not celebrate. For him the old general dying peacefully in bed and without a trial was not a reason to celebrate, but for nausea. A few months after writing a famous piece called *The Column of Nausea*, he abandoned the country. However, explaining these complicated aspects of being Chilean to Norman was impossible or at least too time consuming.

“I am tired of being Chilean,” I joked. Norman couldn’t know, or if he knew he couldn’t understand, that after the Dictatorship, Chile became a divided country. A fellow countryman was not necessarily a friend anymore. That was one of the reasons I was in America.

“I guess you and my dad would have a lot to talk about!” Norman said. “You have to tell his story, buddy! Now I am sure you are the guy for this. With you I feel as if I was talking to my father. For some reason he and you don’t sound like other Chileans I know. Now I am sure you are the man for that job.”

“Job?” was the only thing I said. However, Norman had already recruited me.

Did I have to tell his story? We never talked about money and I believed my time as ghostwriter was buried in my past. I was the author of my own book, a professor, and I didn’t want to tell anybody else’s story. I was sure I had earned the right of pick my own stories.

A few days later, I received a phone call. Norman wanted me to go to his father's. I wonder why I accepted. It is not that I regret it; the story of his father was unique, but I didn't know it yet.

The mysterious old man lived in Virginia. Norman's place was great; however it was still just a middle class suburban home. His father's house was enormous and a little bit unattended. It was like an old German style house brought from Bavaria or from Valdivia, the city in the south of Chile where I grew up that was the center of the Chilean-German community. I could not tell if the house was that old or if it was a new one. Americans have an authentic gothic cathedral built in 1970, or at least that is the year engraved on its wall; they also have a house from the eighteenth century in the middle of Georgetown, and it looks just like a regular house. They build what they want and then it's almost impossible to determine the age of the construction: they also build the age if they want their buildings to look old and full of tradition. The front of the house had stone walls, windows in the English style and the elaborate window frames were white. Two identical bay windows looked like the eyes of an enormous insect. The insect seemed to be lying on the slightly overgrown grass, and waiting for a prey different than us, because it didn't move. There were some weeds mixed with the flowers. The black door was in the center of the house and it looked like the enormous insect's mouth. The whimsical roof was folded as if it was the pair of wings of a giant red flying beetle. The door had an iron hand as doorknocker, but Norman pressed a button to ring a bell. We waited a minute or two before the door was opened.

“The old man is expecting us,” said Norman. “He will open the door by himself. His illness has made him a little bit slow.”

It was the first time that I heard of an illness. Then I knew I couldn’t say no to an ill man and I was condemned to tell whatever he wanted me to tell. I wanted to run away, but that would be very impolite. Fortunately I didn’t do it.

A man opened the mouth of the insect. The creature didn’t need to move to attract its prey. I understood that they would not share the diagnosis with me, but later I learned that it was something related to lungs, maybe cancer or emphysema. When he opened the door, the iron hand slightly knocked on the door by itself too late. The man looked too old to be Norman’s father, he looked old enough to be my father and even a little old for that, but not as old as being my grandfather. The interior of the house was a reflection of the garden. The style was deliberately old fashioned and antiques composed most of the furniture.

“I grew up surrounded by antiques,” said the old man in English, “but in my times we just called them *cachureo*.” *Cachureo* was the Spanish and very Chilean word for junk.

I smiled for some reason; maybe it was because of the word *cachureo*.

“*Un hombre se rodea de cosas familiares en su diáspora*,” he said. “A man in diaspora surrounds himself with familiar things.”

The feeling of the whole house was very different from Norman’s place. This man’s furniture had carved faces and the feet of most of the pieces were carved claws that hold a ball. The cleaning was a little bit clumsy, and the whole feeling of his house was a mix of majesty, power, and a touch of decline. I felt I was in the

middle of a horror film and this man was like the old Dracula in Coppola's movie, even though he had short conventional white hair and fingernails. Maybe I had to admit I was genre writer.

"Sorry I don't have a better cleaning, but the woman who does it is elderly and I haven't the heart to fire her," said the old man in Spanish. "She comes here and talks to me about her family in El Salvador and the gossip of the neighborhood. I couldn't care less about what she tells me, but somehow she makes me company with her small talk. I learned to appreciate her. Besides, normally I don't have too many guests. My son's friends would probably think that I am a hideous Republican, and my own friends are those hideous Republicans that people believe I am. I'm not one of them and I don't like them."

Norman went to the kitchen to make some tea. In the mean time, the man and I remained sitting on couches with Italian red upholstery and the clawed feet. Only then I recognized the man who was in front of me.

"Excuse me, are you...?" I asked.

"Yes, I am," he said.

It is a real loss not telling who this man was. But he left a family and I owe them loyalty and respect after they told me his story. That was his only condition. I don't see reasons enough in what happened a year after that meeting to stop respecting our pact. However, I allow myself to say that this man once had a position that was very well known in Chile; it is almost impossible for a foreigner to reach that position in the United States. May be I am talking too much already, but this is the only way to transmit the impression that this man made on me. Doing this is

very difficult without revealing his identity; this man had quite a name. In any case, I can say that his aversion to the GOP was a surprise: he was supposed to be one of them; at least he worked for the Bush Sr. administration. It was in a very technical position. He was not a politician.

“¿Sorprendido? (Surprised?)” he said. He had a little accent in his own language, as it happens to people who live abroad that long. His Spanish was correct, but it was like the talking in a dubbed film; dubbed with that international Spanish that nobody actually speaks in any Spanish-speaking country.

“Actually, I am,” I answered in English, but then I switched to Spanish. His accent made me use English by reflex.

“Many people do that,” he said.

“Sorry, what do many people do?” I asked.

“Many Hispanic people speak to me in English. I’ve acquired some American accent. But please keep the Spanish. It’s nice to listen to the Chilean accent again,” said the man, “especially when they don’t ask me where I went to school or if I happen to know some of their old relatives. That’s what I like about young people!”

Norman came back with the tea. I am a man of coffee, but I drank the tea anyway.

“I read your book, young man, and I liked it!” said Norman’s father. The thing I loved the most about old people is that they called me “young man”. Osvaldo did it and it felt great. That was not his name of course, but that is the name I chose to use. It was the name of my grandfather. I gave him this name as a show of respect.

Osvaldo's mother happened to be a southern Chilean and he was familiar with the myth of my book. He grew up in Santiago, but surrounded by stories of the black birds. He remembered the countryside he used to visit on vacations as a kid. That countryside didn't exist anymore. His words were extracted from the seventies and nowadays nobody speaks as he did in Chile. He was from another time and it was actually great talking to him. I felt I was talking to my own grandfather and that's another reason why I gave him his name.

"It's good to know a famous writer," he finally said. "I also met Roberto once, but I didn't tell him my story."

"I am not any famous yet, sir. I just had some success in Chile and here not many people know about me. Roberto, on the other hand, is well known."

"That will change because you will tell the story of the Astrum Aureum Society," he said.

I looked at him and then I looked at Norman.

"The Astrum Aureum Society?" I asked as if I didn't hear well. "That is a myth for bad Hollywood movies and bad sensationalist books." I really thought it was.

"I was the Great Master of that myth until last year," Osvaldo said calmly, "then I got too sick."

I looked into his eyes to see if he was being serious. He was smiling, but his smile was satisfied; he wasn't mocking me. Norman was wearing the same smile. It was the best moment to see the resemblance between the father and the son. For a moment I thought that even the carved faces of the furniture would mock me.

Finally I understood they were telling the truth.

"I didn't mean to offend you, sir," was the only thing that came to my head. I didn't laugh, but I felt guilty for my disbelief.

"Not taken," he said, "they are just a bunch of losers!"

I don't know how my face looked then, but I guess it looked funny, because Osvaldo began to laugh very hard.

"You need to know the story of how I became the Great Master of that bullshit!"

"Dad, you have to take it easy," said Norman.

"That's what happens when you're old and sick. I used to see this guy covered with his own poo and now he is giving the orders," said Osvaldo to me. He turned to his son and gave his own orders: "The black box is in the studio. There are my notes and some documents for Arturo. If you have any other thing, give it to him, *por favor*."

Norman obeyed as if he was in the military. He silently went to the studio and I remained alone with Osvaldo.

"It's hot today," I said, but it wasn't. I was just trying to make some normal conversation.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

"Kind of," I answered. I knew that there was no point in trying to hide my surprise. Whatever I expected before coming to Osvaldo's was not even remotely near to what I had learned.

“Don’t be nervous, there is nothing to be afraid of, if you follow my instructions. If I am not able to continue instructing you in the future – as I am afraid will be the case – Norman will know exactly what to do,” said Osvaldo.

I told him that nobody actually had proofs of the Astrum Aureum being still alive. I exhibited my erudition telling him what I knew about the society. Nevertheless, what I said could be found almost in Wikipedia – almost; there is not any entry with the name Astrum Aureum, because I made that name up. I was not allowed to mention the real name of the society and it was not wise to do so.

“I am not afraid, but excited,” I confessed. “Nobody ever knew too much about Astrum Aureum and I really want to write your complete memoir about it.”

“Sorry,” said Osvaldo, “no memoirs.”

Norman came back with the box. He gave it to me without talking.

“Excuse me, but why are you giving me these documents then?”

Osvaldo took some time.

“I cannot allow you to expose directly the members of the society. You cannot even use the name. Please create one yourself, something as ridiculous as Astrum Aureum, but please use words in Latin,” Osvaldo smiled. “That will piss off many people!”

“Excuse me, sir, what do you want me to do?” I didn’t know what to think at that point or how it was I accepted an assignment again.

“I would like you to read all that. My notes are in Spanish. You can tell everything except for the names of the people. I think there are no real names in those notes anyway,” said Osvaldo.

“Why didn’t you contact Roberto?” I asked. “He is a journalist and I am not.”

“I did, actually he was the one who gave me the idea of writing a memoir first. I only came with those awful notes. However, Brodsky cannot do the job. His boss is one of them or one of us,” he answered. “You, on the other hand, are only connected to American University, and the Writing Center in Maryland. Those are some of the rare institutions where they have no any control.”

“How did Brodsky know, sir?”

“He doesn’t know,” Osvaldo lighted a cigarette. “Fortunately he never read my notes and he wasn’t as well informed as you are about Astrum Aureum. Maybe he even forgot the name.”

“That’s not good for you, Dad,” said Norman.

“It cannot harm me anymore, son,” said Norman and then he spoke to me. “I investigated you. There is nobody of the Astrum Aureum related to you here or in Chile. But I wonder, how is it that you know that much about the society already?”

“I guess because I am a *genre* man,” I answered, “and because I had a phase in the occult. Its only worth was to write *genre* stories.”

“And did you never find the Astrum Aureum?” asked Osvaldo. He completely ignored my remark on the *genre*.

“Do they have a chapter in Chile?” I asked.

“There are three chapters, kid.” His weak condition seemed to disappear when he looked at me directly in the eyes. “They have three in Chile, five in Brazil, three in Argentina, and seven in Mexico. They wanted to open one in Venezuela, but with Chavez it was kind of difficult. I’ve never looked to be part of Astrum Aureum. I

didn't even know about its existence. It seems that a true searcher cannot find them," Osvaldo smiled.

"I don't want to be part of something like that, sir, not anymore," I said. "I am a totally different person now."

"Of course," said Osvaldo, "some people grow up. But you will understand what I am talking about after you read my memoir. Well, my notes. I wrote them very fast and I didn't do any editing. I'm not a writer and I didn't try to be one. I am just a man who knows some hard facts."

"What do you want me to write, sir?" I asked again.

"Write my story properly and professionally and please stop calling me sir. I'm not as old as I look. It's just because of my condition."

It was hard calling Osvaldo by his name. He was a powerful and clever man and he was interesting in his own right. If any other person came to me talking about the Astrum Aureum Society, I wouldn't even listen.

"I am not giving you almost any information about the American branch. I just wrote about what happened in Chile long time ago. I think most of the people are already dead. Some of them were beloved friends, like the guys of *Génova*, and especially Rafael, but most of them were just a bunch of *conchesumadres*." That was the equivalent in Spanish for motherfucker. I didn't know yet what *Génova* was. Finding out about it was one of the most amazing things that one can find out about a man like Osvaldo. "After the miners, nobody cares anymore about what happens in Chile," he continued, "especially if we are talking about things that happened when you were a baby. America is another thing. The center of the Astrum Aureum

Society is here and I have a son and a granddaughter to protect. But you will find information enough to understand what I want you to tell.”

I wanted to ask about Chile and the times of our own Dictatorship. But Osvaldo had some aura of majesty, and I didn’t know if asking that kind of question was acceptable. However, we didn’t talk much longer. Despite the strength of his spirit, Osvaldo’s body wasn’t that strong anymore. Anyway, some of those answers would be pretty clear in his notes, and some others would be the product of my own research. Osvaldo pressed a white switch on the wall. The Salvadorian woman came in and she helped Norman to take the old man to his bed. It took five minutes for her to arrive in the living room. I guess Osvaldo wanted her far away while we were talking.

“I can still walk, but stairs became difficult,” he said.

I offered my help.

“Being helped by a woman older than myself and my son is enough humiliation, young man!” said Osvaldo. I liked his sense of humor.

“Are you saying that I am older than you, don Osvaldo?” said the woman.

“I didn’t say that,” said Osvaldo. “You heard it totally wrong! Maybe because of your age!”

The woman was certainly younger than Osvaldo and much healthier. She laughed at his jokes. She also looked strong and was kind of heavy. Her name was María, as it is the name of all poor women in Latin America. Norman went upstairs with them.

“One more thing,” said Osvaldo in a clear voice. His voice wasn’t the voice of an ill man; it radiated authority. “Maybe I’m not telling you about what happens in America, but in the society it is just the same as in Chile. Are you familiar with the Hermetic Principles?”

The mention of the Hermetic Principles took me back to my own youth. I remembered my readings and my initiation into my own modest order. I really believed I was part of something special; a kind of chosen man for a sublime purpose. I remembered my “brothers” and “sisters” of my own society. Some of them were so convinced about having some eternal truth.

“I am,” I answered to Osvaldo.

“*As above, so below; as below, so above,*” he said. He was quoting the Hermetic Principle called *Correspondence*. “Things in Chile are just like things here. There is no difference, not inside the order.”

Osvaldo didn’t say goodbye. His body became a silhouette in front of the light of the window of the landing. Then the group disappeared going upstairs. I remained alone in the lobby, watching the stairs and feeling an inexplicable sorrow. Norman came back and told me to go to his car. He seemed sad and I guessed Osvaldo wasn’t very well.

“¿Qué tan enfermo está el hombre?” I asked Norman in Spanish, meaning how ill was he.

“Very,” he said in English. English was Norman’s first language. He made efforts to communicate in Spanish, but when he talked without thinking, he used words in English.

“*Ya veo* (I see),” I said in Spanish. Like his father, Norman didn’t like it when his Hispanic friends talked to him in English.

“Yeah...” he said again in English, “but it is what it is. His illness is incurable.” The last part of the sentence was in Spanish. Norman was thinking again.

I kept quiet for some seconds and so did Norman. Obviously this was a sad subject.

“What was all that about?” I asked Norman in the car.

I was a horror writer, but I did not believe any of the things I wrote before this. In my old system of beliefs, something like the Astrum Aureum Society was not supposed to exist anymore. Not as something serious.

“You’ll see,” he said.

“Do you have to be that mysterious?” I asked again.

“All the answers are in that box and I can help you with some lacunas” he said. “Dad also wants to help, but I think he won’t be able to.”

I regretted meeting Osvaldo that late. Not everyday it is possible to meet someone like him, and not every day a man of his stature honors one with his trust.

He died that precise night and, of course I thought that the coincidence was uncanny if not creepy or too incredible. It was as if the *genre* chased me into reality. Maybe it was a cliché, but as all people die, death is always an unavoidable cliché.

Norman told me he died in his sleep. He thought it was a good way to die, but too soon. He told me he was prepared for this event and he could confront it well. *Crónica de una Muerte Anunciada* (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*) I thought, quoting García Márquez.

For me his death was strangely painful. It was the abortion of one of the most interesting friendships I could ever have. There was something moving about this man telling me his story just before dying and I resisted feeling as if I was in some kind of encounter determined by fate; I don't believe in fate. However, that was not the last time I met Osvaldo. Funerals also count as meetings, farewell meetings but meetings at the end. I didn't want to go, but Norman almost forced me.

The funeral was the day after. It was Sunday. Osvaldo had made the arrangements and María just had to call certain number. Some of the arrangements were to avoid his ex-wife interfering in the funeral or at least that was what Norman told me. Osvaldo never told her about his illness. His son told me that it was because he didn't want her crying by his side while he was dying.

"Did your mother still love your father?" I asked Norman.

"I guess. The story is complicated."

"All divorce stories are," I told him.

"She is going to kill me," said Norman, "because my dad is already dead."

When I came to the funeral I was more familiar with the Astrum Aureum. So I went alone. At the time I didn't want to tell Leonor about the things I read about in Osvaldo's notes. She easily gets scared and I thought she probably couldn't sleep if she knew about the Society.

We had a small fight about this; she had already become fond of Brenda, Norman, and the baby.

Now she knows everything about the society, because she helped me with the reading of Osvaldo's notes. Amazingly she didn't seem to be scared, but it was because, at the time, she didn't know what I found later.

The funeral was at an elegant but discreet funeral home. People looked important and old – again no details about place or people, however those places look the same everywhere in the world: sober and mostly beige decoration, chairs disposed before the coffin, and of course tons of flowers of different kinds, mixing their perfumes and making some people sneeze. It was an open casket and it wasn't covered by a glass, as it is in Chile; that was the only remarkable difference. Norman was receiving the condolences because he was the only present survivor. Brenda wasn't there and I knew it was wise not to bring Leonor. A group of people surrounded the coffin holding hands in a circle. It seemed like a Freemason funeral. Norman wasn't part of the chain. I learned that that meant he wasn't a member of the Astrum Aureum Society, not yet.

The similarities with the Freemasonry vanished when I saw a peculiar sword: It was a wavy sword. Its blade imitated a flame. Freemasons used them for their own ritual, but neither in public nor for their funerals. It was supposed to represent the flaming sword of the angel who guarded the Garden of Eden. Its meaning for those people is still unknown to me: Osvaldo couldn't extend the courtesy of describing his own funeral.

There were too many people and they finally formed three circles surrounding the coffin. Only Norman and I remained outside of them. The sword

was brandished by one man. He touched Osvaldo's heart with the point of the blade. As I learned later, the ritual was supposed to be secret. I didn't understand why they tolerated my presence. At the time I thought they didn't notice me.

Everything was in Latin and I understood why Osvaldo wanted me to use that language. I correctly guessed that they thought that Latin was also a measure for secrecy. However, I happened to be one of the few persons who know a little bit of Latin. It is one of my useless talents, like origami and Chinese calligraphy – I know just the calligraphy, but not a word of Chinese, except for the menu of my favorite Chinese restaurant in China Town. I think this was the first – and probably the last – time in my life when Latin was really useful.

“Excellentissime Amice Magisterque (Very excellent friend and Master),” said the officiant. He was a guy in his sixties or so and he pronounced the language in the classic way, not in the ecclesiastic. That means that the *c* sounds always like *k*. In the ecclesiastic pronunciation, *c* sounds like *ch* as it does in Italian – I never thought this kind of knowledge would be ever useful. Norman told me the officiant was Osvaldo's successor. “Now you are going to the *Eternal Stonehenge* and we will remain here honoring your legacy and the mission of the Astrum Aureum.”

Then all of them showed their naked left arm. I didn't see it at the moment, but later I learned that they were showing a small tattoo. All of them were wearing black suits and black ties. There were only men. My suit was grey and this was like a red signal that said I wasn't part of the society. Yes, clearly they thought I was meaningless. Nevertheless, my understanding of their scorn came a little later.

“This will be really funny,” said Norman in my ear.

When the officiant looked at Osvaldo's naked arm, he looked to the other guys. They were holding each other hand in a ring again, and I guessed that they were not supposed to break the circle until the end of the ritual.

"He doesn't have the mark!" said the officiant in the plainest English. A mutter began among the people around the body. Nonetheless, they did not break the ring. "I suppose it doesn't matter anymore."

The muttering ended.

The group recovered the order and the Great Master continued the rite. I could not understand the rest of it. I believed my Latin was rusty, but as I found later, they were using an altered form of the language to protect their alleged secrets. As I learned by the documents in the box, the alterations were almost childish; they changed the ending of the words of the first declination for the endings of the second and vice versa. In that way, a word like *agricola* turned into *agriculus*, and this last word never existed. However, I was totally unaware about this simple trick, therefore I couldn't understand the rest of the funeral. Fortunately they used this altered form of Latin only for the most secret part of their rituals.

"Evohe!" they shouted at some point and then, "amen!" They covered Osvaldo's arm and theirs. The Great Master approached Norman and me.

"You are a little early, Mister..." he said to me.

"Ruiz, Arturo Ruiz," I said as if I was James Bond and presented my hand. He shook it coldly.

"Where are you from, Mister Ruiz?" I immediately knew that the Mister treatment didn't mean any respect, but just distance. The guy was tall, had blue eyes and he was also someone very important, but then I didn't know who he was.

"I am from Chile, sir," I answered, "like Osvaldo."

The man's face turned almost friendly, but kept the distance.

"Are you family?" he asked.

"He is my cousin," lied Norman. "He was lucky to find a plane just for the funeral. I couldn't allow him to stay home alone. Brenda is in Minnesota with her mother and Gabriela."

"I see," said the Great Master. Then he looked at me again. "Mister..."

"Ruiz," I said.

"Mister Ruiz," he repeated, "the ceremony you just have seen is private and I have to ask for your total discretion."

"Of course," I smiled.

For obvious reasons, I cannot reveal the identity of the Great Master, but I guess many people would be as surprised as I was when I finally recognized his face in the newspaper a few days after. I hope I don't earn such an enemy. However, they would know that Osvaldo and I wrote about them here. Since I am not exposing any real name of any member of the Astrum Aureum Society, I am supposed to be safe, or at least that is what Osvaldo told me. Now I have my doubts, but the die is cast already.

“Good,” said the Great Master. After that he turned to talk to Norman as if I wasn’t there. “We really want you to be nearer to us, to be one of us. Your father was a great man and you will always have the same place in our heart.”

“Thank you,” said Norman. “But you know I am a different animal from my father and I want to achieve my goals by my own means.”

“Do you believe that Astrum Aureum didn’t take care of you all these years?” The Great Master seemed emotionally concerned. “We always watched you and protected you as a son. Now it is time for you to join us as brother. You have to work for the mission.”

“The mission, of course,” smiled Norman.

“We will be waiting for you this Wednesday,” said the Great Master. “As a matter of fact, I will send my limo for you.”

Norman just nodded.

“Your father always told us about you being a rebel,” continued the Great Master. His blue eyes were almost paternal. “It’s time for you to grow up and embrace your legacy! It is a good legacy.”

Normal people began to come and they approached Norman and the Great Master. They called the old man by his name, they didn’t know who he really was – I didn’t know who he was in normal life then, even though I heard his name many times. After that day at the funeral I tried to pay more attention to people. However I am very bad with faces and names. The people who came later – profanes – thought he was just a regular powerful man, as if there was something regular in being

powerful. The members of the order mixed with the new people and everything looked perfectly normal.

A Protestant minister came and began his service. He was dressed like a Catholic priest, but with a pink or red shirt. I think the expensive name for that color is fuschia. Norman told me that his father was baptized Catholic, but he converted to Episcopalian because of his wife. However, he was not a religious man. Norman also told me they found a note on his night table. It had his last words: "I am happy to getting out of here. I hope I never come back." I didn't tell Norman, but that was exactly what Mexican painter Frida Khalo left written before she died. Recently it was known she killed herself with the help of her husband, Diego de Rivera. She did it because she suffered from severe pain due to her illness. The quote in Osvaldo's final note told me everything I needed to know about his death. I would probably do the same in his place. I didn't know if Norman understood the message; I never found the right moment to ask.

The minister was kindly brief. Even though I'd never been in an Episcopalian service before, the minister could have been a Catholic priest and I would never have noticed the difference, if not for the fuschia shirt. His words were absolutely common and irrelevant. Normal funerals are a cliché. He wasn't remotely as interesting as the members of the order were. I am still wondering where they put the sword. They hid it in a moment I wasn't looking. I had a thing for swords and I even knew how to brandish a katana – another of my useless abilities; I wish I had learned how to do my taxes or fix a car. They probably wouldn't allow me to play with theirs.

The body was cremated, so there was no procession to any cemetery. The funeral home had a crematory. Later I learned that there was a special crypt for the Great Masters of the Astrum Aureum and that Osvaldo's personal arrangements were not well regarded by the order. Norman had to give his ashes to the society and they put them in one of the niches of the crypt. First I suspected he didn't give them the real ashes, but some others. However, later I was certain that Osvaldo's remains ended up there. I went to that crypt and of course they didn't let me in. It wasn't in a regular cemetery but on some private property. I have seen a picture of it. It was a round room and the bodies were in niches inside the wall. The place was very similar to the order's temples and I suspected they used it also as a one.

As usual, later there was a buffet at Osvaldo's house. The food was good, but nothing fancy: mashed potatoes, beef, and salads. This time the house was perfectly clean for the occasion. The furniture and the general decoration were in their full splendor this time, but I liked the house much more when Osvaldo was alive. From the outside it still looked like a giant insect. Norman was receiving handshakes. At that point I still didn't recognize anybody – I wish I was better with faces, but one had to accept his own limits: I didn't even recognize Osvaldo when I first saw him. However, when I went out of the house for a while, I saw a row of limousines on the street and some men in black, maybe from some security agency. Only then I realized I was among important people. One by one, people began to go. I didn't know the name of anybody, but Norman told me some of the names later. Nobody talked to me during the buffet, not even Norman. He was too busy with the guests. Everybody seemed to know each other and nobody was interested in the new guy.

Of course it wouldn't be wise to tell here who they were. Amazingly not any member of the press was there, not covering the funeral. Nevertheless, some of the most important people in the media were invited to the funeral and they were inside eating the food. Two of them were part of the ring.

After everything was over, I helped Norman to close the house.

"This Wednesday they will force me to be one of them," said Norman.

"Could you just refuse?" I asked.

"Do you know how old I am?" he asked.

"I think you're about 25. You're awfully young, but I forgive you," I joked, but he didn't laugh.

"How many people do you know who own a house like mine at my age?" he asked.

"Not many," I answered.

"That's because Astrum Aureum has been always watching my back. I have a better job than my classmates and I simply accepted their help," he said. "I've never actually proved myself."

"I did," I said, "and I can tell you that you didn't lose anything except for the struggle."

"You sound just like my father," he replied. "Don't you get any satisfaction from doing things without any help?"

"I didn't do anything without any help," I answered. "Many people helped me in the most unexpected ways and with the most amazing generosity. Nobody is able to do anything by himself. The self-made man is just another American myth."

"It's that some Chilean wisdom or something?" asked Norman. "My father said exactly the same to me."

"I think it is a kind of old guys from other country's wisdom. But your apprehensions make you a very decent man. However, if you let those worries take control, you won't be decent, but stupid." Later I thought I also had to tell him that if he totally forgot about those concerns, he would be indecent and even more stupid. I don't think he would have listened to me anyway.

"Have you read the manuscript?" he asked me.

"Sort of; your father's calligraphy is awful and I am not any good in reading hand writing."

"So you haven't reached the end yet," said Norman. I hadn't even read the first pages. "Please go there quickly and call me soon, I really would like to know what's in it!" He looked at the house. I guessed he had some nostalgia.

"What will you do with this house?" I asked Norman. "Will you live here now?"

"No, this neighborhood is too white, too old, and too rich. I think I'm going to rent it and to sell most of the furniture," he said. "Do you want something? Most of it is really antique. I don't have money issues at this point."

I told him I wouldn't know what to do with such furniture in my small apartment. Besides, I didn't want to abuse Norman's generosity, not yet. I still thought we were friends.

Of course I saw what was in the box before the funeral. The most important object was a black copybook with a red spine and numbered lined pages. There also

were a few letters, some papers with the seal of the Astrum Aureum Society, some pictures, and a small pin with their emblem. The picture of a blonde caught my attention. First I thought it was a magazine cutting, because the girl in it looked like a model, but it was an actual picture. In the back it was written "Cristina, Little Union, 1976." She appeared in many of the pictures of the box. Most of them were black and white, but in one of the few color pictures, her eyes appeared in their entire green splendor. I recognized Osvaldo in some pictures and there were also some other people in the photographs; however, the only name written in the back was the name of the blonde. It seemed that she was the only important person; her name and the date were written with green ink. After reading Osvaldo notes, I was certain I could tell the name of everyone in the pictures. The contents of the black box obsessed me: the story of Osvaldo, the Astrum Aureum Society, and especially the man's life. If I have to describe Osvaldo in one sentence, I have to say that he was a common man turned into someone extraordinary by circumstances. However, it is impossible to put all what he was in one sentence. Fortunately I had a whole book; in few days the annoying commission turned into my own project.

The manuscript was difficult because it was handwritten and Osvaldo did not happen to have good handwriting. The first step was putting it in the wonderful format of the word processor created by God. Only Leonor could help me in that process. I couldn't use anybody else's help. My wife has a gift for reading bad handwriting and she became a fan of the black notebook Osvaldo used.

The style was very clumsy, fast, and it seemed written by a non-native speaker. I wonder why he decided to use Spanish if he was already more used to

English; maybe he wasn't able to translate his memories. Norman told me that his father began to write his notes when he knew about his illness and met Roberto: about five years before I got them. He didn't stop to make any corrections of any kind. He also had some other issues and he couldn't dedicate all of his time to his writing. I imagined him writing one other night, having again all the emotions of his memories, abandoning the manuscript, and going back to it. As a matter of fact, manuscript is a too big word. The black and red copybook was just a bunch of notes and the ending – or the absence of an ending – would make me work to figure out the whole picture. In any case, at the end of his life he considered most of the facts were in his big black and red copybook. I wish he had used his computer. Computers are great for people who never developed the ability to use a pen, like him or me.

I remember that day quite well. It was also my birthday. It was one of the worst days of my life and I wondered how I ended so low. However, that was one of the last days of my *profane* life and after it nothing would be the same.

I didn't even know I was a *profane* or what it meant. My life used to be pretty normal –perhaps a little bit grey and mediocre, but I was reasonably happy or I should be: as a matter of fact, I was; even though I didn't know I was happy, because happiness consists in not having the need for questions about happiness. After I graduated from college, I went to work for the government at the most obscure sections of the Department of Housing. It was nothing fancy, but the job was not much and by the time I was back in Santiago –I had to start in another city as it was the custom – I thought I had made some good friends; but none of them stayed in contact with me. However, I cannot blame them: being in contact with a man fired because of political reasons was dangerous. I lost their tracks. Later I knew some of them died shortly after the coup or just disappeared. That's what happens when democracy is lost.

I lost my job because I got there with the references of the wrong referee. I never was a political person. My mom said I was lucky and that it could be worse. She was right. However, it felt really bad to be unemployed. Mom had my father's pension and she was about to retire herself from her job as a schoolteacher. I wanted to find a job according to my abilities, but as we were not precisely swimming in money, I began a brilliant career as a waiter. I worked in a restaurant called *Génova* – last time I was in Santiago I saw it was still open; I went to eat there,

but nobody remembered me. I wonder what happened to Millán, Henríquez or Janequeo. They were good guys. I don't know how I felt about that place after so many years.

In the seventies after the coup against President Allende, most of the waiters, cab drivers, and janitors were guys like me: people who knew the wrong people and who were working there just waiting for a better opportunity. That was a new meaning for the word waiter. Millán, however, was different. He was an old school waiter and was very proud of his job. He taught us the art of correct service. I guess he must be dead by now; he was old enough to be my father. Maybe he was younger than I thought then. I had the pride of my youth and I thought that older people were ancient. Henríquez and Janequeo were college graduates and they didn't talk too much. Well, nobody talked too much in those days; neither did I. I knew Millán was married and I also knew he had a son in college. He was proud, but also afraid of this. Colleges were not the safest places, especially for people studying a teaching major. Millán's son wanted to be a Spanish teacher. Maybe the most dangerous major of the time, because they used to read books. Philosophy, Sociology, and Anthropology majors were closed. The Dictatorship thought that those majors were full of Communist teachers and students.

Henríquez was just like me and also in his early twenties. He was fired from the Mining Department; he was an engineer. Maybe because he had a fancier major, he was much bitterer than I was and he also was a little bit paranoid. However, that was not a mental condition then, but just the normal and proper response to the times we were living in. Janequeo was always making silly jokes. First I thought that

the guy was nice, but he was as paranoid as Henríquez. He was just better hiding his own paranoia. I never knew if he was married, or if he had a girlfriend, or where he lived. I used to work mostly at noon because the dinner service was suspended because of the curfew imposed by the Dictatorship.

After work, as I had plenty of spare time, I began to frequent a used bookstore called *Babel*. It was on the first floor of my home building at San Diego Street. There I shared my mother's apartment paying the lowest rent of the world, but using my money to help in what ever we needed. I lived there even before I lost my job. In Chile, in the seventies, children used to live with their parents until they got married. They say people don't do that anymore. However, since my mom was a lonely, old, and vulnerable woman, I would probably have to live with her until her death even in these more modern times. If I didn't stay by her side, it was only because of very powerful reasons that were totally out of my control.

The fact that the bookstore was so near home allowed me to stay late, even until a little past the time to go to bed imposed by the Dictatorship – that was an allegedly necessary measure before they could reestablish the freedom lost under President Allende's regime; I didn't lose any freedom during Allende's presidency. For me there was a little problem, like a contradiction. How someone was supposed to restore freedom by prohibitions?

I first entered in the bookstore because I was chasing a very beautiful blonde – her name was Cristina, but I learned that about a year after. When I was inside, however, I was not able to talk to her, because I was a very shy young man. I began to go to the bookstore every day, but the blonde didn't show again until about a year

later. Somehow, the owner and I became friends with each other. He was an old man called Rafael – as a matter of fact, I think he was younger than I am now, but I was just 22. He began to introduce me to the reading of poetry. He was a “retired” professor from the Philosophy School at Universidad de Chile. His retirement was because the military thought he could be a Communist, of course, and because they closed the Philosophy major. The university lost a wonderful professor. He was able to teach me the taste for poetry. If I had had a teacher like him in school, I would probably be a different person. Rafael was an old acquaintance: he lived in the same building we lived in. Before that period, my sole relation with him was saying hello. People used to say he was a boring old man and nobody could understand what he said. I avoided him as a child, and forgot about him when I was older. I didn’t know he was the owner of the propriety where the bookstore was until they fired him from the university. Only then he began to use the space. He told me he began to sell his own personal collection of books and that that was very painful.

After a while, Rafael and I began to have long conversations, long and deep conversations. Depth was not precisely in fashion in those times. Every dialogue was shallow, pointless, or minimalist. Talking was dangerous. I was not afraid because I thought that the worst thing that could happen to me had already happened: I had lost my job. I was not afraid of anything else only because of my simplicity and ignorance; people were being tortured and murdered by the army itself. I didn’t know exactly what was happening. Everything was very confused. The government said Communists and subversives infested the country. I neither bought the tale of the infestation, nor the rumors of tortures and killings; it was just too much to

believe. Besides, how could I know when nobody was talking directly? Before the Dictatorship Rafael was like Socrates and he was always interrogating the neighbors.

“What’s life for you?” or “What’s the true nature of beauty?” were his typical questions. I don’t remember if I answered him when I was a kid. As a teenager I avoided *the crazy old man of the building* and as an adult I was too busy for him. After the coup, he stopped talking to strangers the way everybody else did. He was an orphan of conversations.

We began to talk because we met each other across decades. We knew that neither of us would talk to the Dictatorship’s security service. Rafael’s store had a back room and we could stay there after the curfew without any danger. There we began to continue the conversations started in the front room of the store. He had four chairs, a table, books, and his big green thermos with coffee. Sometimes we took there a bottle of wine and paper cups. He was too lazy to wash real glasses and to polite to let me do it. That back room’s hygiene was arguable, but it was certainly cleaner than the living room of his apartment. There was no window there; therefore it was as if time had stopped and stopped before the Dictatorship.

As he understood I was too young to have a good head for Philosophy, we began talking about literature. I was always a voracious reader of fiction, but was Rafael who taught me how to read poetry. He insisted that Huidobro was better than Neruda, and he didn’t like DeRokha. Rafael said he had personally met DeRokha and that he was a bully and even a dangerous man. Rafael told me that DeRokha used to be escorted by big guys dressed in black. His disciples were also his bodyguards. In

any case, I became a fan of Neruda and his love poems. It was maybe because I was a loveless guy. I had a girlfriend when I was working at the Department of Housing, but she dumped me shortly after I lost my job: she was a fervent partisan of the General. It didn't hurt. I remembered I received the news after work – she was working, I wasn't – when I went to my old office to take her home.

“I think it's better if you don't come for me at work, Osvaldo,” she said to me.

“I understand,” I said naively, “I won't come again. We can meet somewhere else.”

She was about to cry. Her name was Emilia.

“I think is better if we don't see each other anymore,” she finally said.

I remember it was kind of hard for me to understand she was dumping me. I had to ask her if she was. She just nodded and she finally cried. I didn't feel especially sad. I was surprised that our relationship was that meaningless. Before the coup and before I lost my job, Emilia and I had talked about children and a house. The Chilean dream was a modest version of the American dream for people like us. We were young, ignorant and politically naive. We were like most of the people. I would like to think that her dumping me had to have some effect on me, but it didn't. When I was in high school, my Spanish teacher said I had the sensitivity of a rock and it would be impossible for me to fall in love. I was proud of it. At that age I firmly wanted to believe that love was something for girls. That was until Rafael presented Neruda to me. Neruda was a declared Communist, but because of his Nobel Prize, the Dictatorship did not forbid most of his books, except for *General Chant*. They thought this book was a Communist Manifesto in verse – I wonder why.

Neruda also wrote his infamous *Ode to Stalin* and this was also forbidden. Besides of those books, Neruda was mostly known as a poet of love. At the time I didn't know anything about *General Chant*, except that Rafael had one at home. He risked his life twice: first having the book, and second telling me that he had the book.¹

Both of us used to converge in Lorca. At the beginning we never talked about politics. It wasn't that we didn't trust each other; a place like his was a magnet for the government's vigilance. I remember seeing some *costumers* asking for some books for kids or something similar. One of those *costumers* bought the same title twice. All of them were younger than thirty and looked the same: their typical moustaches and their haircuts used to give them away. They wore their hair very short and wearing the hair like The Beatles was in fashion for men. Even the conservatives wore their hair like that. I think that their purpose was not only to spy, but also to intimidate. However, their poor camouflage could also be the product of their lack of intelligence. Soon saying *military intelligence* became a joke. When I was already in the United States, they even gave me a book entitled *Hinteligencia Militar* (Military Intelligence, de 'h' was deliberately misspelled); the pages of the book were blank². When the spies entered the store, Rafael began to use difficult and academic language:

¹ The book was in the box with the rest of the material. Neruda dedicated it to Rafael and Rafael to Osvaldo. Norman let me keep the book and I couldn't be happier. I would like to have it dedicated by Osvaldo, but one cannot have everything one wants.

² I had that book in my hands. It was a best seller and, with some fortune, it is still possible to find it in some used bookstores.

“As you know, my friend,” he told me once – he wanted the spy to hear. “The semantics in Lorca are complicated because there is a dichotomy between symbols and meanings. This dichotomy is mediated by the structure of his poetry.” He used to say things like that just to make fun of the spies. The spies certainly were members of the army and they were not especially literate. The sons of the best families of the country mostly composed the officers’ class. They were the bad students at their expensive Catholic schools. As they were not very intelligent, they finished in the army, the navy or the air force. I guess that this is still the source of our professional army officers. I had to talk to Chilean high-ranking officers a few times and they are not especially smart. The spies or “frogs” were normally young officers sent to spy in civilian clothes.

Rafael told me that one day an officer in uniform went to the store to ask what was the meaning of ‘metonym’. He told him that it meant the replacement of one word for another in a speech. The officer thought it was a Russian disinformation technique. Fortunately, Rafael had a dictionary with him. I was not there and when he told me he was laughing about it. I guess he wasn’t laughing in front of the officer.

We, humans are creatures of habits. The exceptional way of living in the seventies became normal to me. The curfew became the natural time to go home or stay at the store. I even discovered that being a waiter wasn’t that bad and I could make a living out of it, if I knew how to smile. However, I still looked for a job every Sunday in the newspaper – job ads used to be published on Sundays. With military discipline, I sent my resumes to different businesses every Monday by mail. I even

went to a pair of interviews. For some reason they never hired me. I don't think I had the reputation of being a Communist. I was just an accountant then and there were not Communists who were also accountants, maybe with the exception of the accountants in Communist Russia. In any case, accounting was by definition the most capitalist profession. Many accountants, however, were members of a party called the Radical Party, which despite its dangerous name, was just like the American Democratic Party. However, a faction of it was totally against the Dictatorship. For the military, everyone who was against Pinochet's was a communist. But I was not a member of the Radical Party. I was not interested in politics, but in having a job. Many of my classmates were exiled or worse, but many others were working in banks and international organizations. They didn't want to know anything about me because the Dictatorship fired me. I have never claimed to be a genius, but I was a fine accountant. I didn't have the means to study a fancier major. The Accounting major was shorter than law and it was supposed to have good prospects.

Despite everything, I have to admit that I was not totally unhappy being a waiter at *Génova*. The bosses were gentle and Millán was a real teacher for the rest of us. Gonzalez, who was the owner, passed more time in the kitchen with Santillán, the chef and his crew of one man: Catrileo. He was a native Mapuche from the south and a man of not many words. Mrs. Gonzalez was always at the register counting the money. I used to help her every month with the taxes and she paid me a little extra. The owners were good people, but also partisans of the dictator. They thought he was the savior of the country. One couldn't trust persons like them in those times –

stupidly I just feared prison or exile. The Government was killing and torturing people for small differences of opinion. We didn't know about it, or at least I didn't yet, but there was something awkward in the air. However, I think that those simple times making jokes about stupid things and avoiding talking about politics were good times.

All the art of a waiter consists in knowing how to smile properly. As I said, I wasn't the political kind of person. So when this captain and his people began to go to *Génova* for lunch, I became the most smiling waiter in the world. He seemed a good guy and he liked to make jokes. I don't remember his name; we called him just "my captain" and sometimes Janequeo called him "my fucking captain" – not in his presence, of course.

"I want my coffee without onions, this time please," the captain used to say. It wasn't a good joke, but I laughed anyway; I was following the teachings of professor Millán.

The other waiters didn't laugh, but the owners and I used to laugh a lot.

"Those fucking soldiers," said Janequeo after the captain was gone. He wasn't especially fond of talking about politics. I guess he couldn't help cursing the captain.

One day the captain asked the golden question.

"Would you like to work in the Officers' Club?"

"If the pay is good," I answered.

The next day he told me that the pay was twice what they paid me at *Génova*. I said yes and Mr. and Mrs. Gonzalez gave me their blessing. They wanted to have friends among the military – even if they were on such a low place on the scale – and

I wanted to make more money. I believed that by working at the Officers' Club I could even escape from the black list.

In the Club I had to wear a tuxedo, and it was true that they paid me double. However, army officers happened to be very bad tippers and therefore I actually made less money. I felt conned. If at *Génova* we didn't talk about politics, at the Officers' Club we didn't talk about anything at all. We were there in silence. Besides, inside the military units they had no curfew and we had to work late, really late. I only saw my friend Rafael on my spare days once a week and he said I was stupid because I went to work with the army.

"Those soldiers of the fatherland are nothing but a fake!" he told me while nobody else was at the bookstore.

I think the Officers' Club could use a guy like Millán. After I left *Génova*, I lost the track of all of them. Millán had the gift of making people feeling happy for a while. I was still just an ignorant accountant who believed that he was better than a simple waiter. It was not until I continued my education in America that I was able to appreciate Millán's wisdom. He was like a Zen master. I guess he would have been able to avoid what happened to me later if he had to work at that awful military place.

"All the art of being a waiter consists in two abilities: one is just not dropping the food or the drinks on the floor," he used to say. "That's the easy part. The second ability is smiling. You need to smile. Nobody wants to feel that the man who serves the table is sad or angry. People are not stupid; they know if you are faking a smile unless you are such a good actor! You have to be happy when you work. If you want

to think about something happy, think about your tips at the end of the day. I never share my tips with anybody, except for the guys in the kitchen. I earned my tips with my smile!”

But customers never tipped in the Officers’ Club. They didn’t even pay. They just signed some sheets of paper and their checks were automatically discounted from their salaries. They never had money with them.

“Next time, Osvaldo!” was the unfulfilled promise I used to hear. Finally I learned that “next time,” meant just “goodbye,” and that it was equally meaningless.

For those reasons, I stopped smiling.

As my coworkers neither smiled nor talked, I don’t remember the names of most of the other guys, even though we all wore nametags.

In spite of the silence, there were rumors about strange things, awful things. I overheard two officers talking about Russian roulettes and gun games. I never saw anything weird until my horrible last day there. Nevertheless, one of the walls was new and they were painting it when I began to work there. They said it was because of a gun accident.

“Communist” was the worst word there.

“Hey, give me another drink! Don’t be a Commie!” They used to say when they were a little or definitively drunk.

“My wife was angry because I went home too late last night, my Colonel,” said a young captain one night.

“You shut up and keep drinking, Captain,” answered the Colonel. “That’s an order and stop being a Commie!”

“Yes, my Colonel!” had to say the captain. He looked worried.

On the news – if you could call it news instead of propaganda – there was a criminal who attacked women in a city in the south. The curfew was only for the capital, and it was lifted soon in the provinces. This guy was certainly a very mentally ill person. He didn’t kill anybody, but he attacked women with a small knife, stabbing their breasts. It was big news, especially because it was a good cover for the crimes committed by the government itself. They finally captured the guy and it was celebrated as a victory of the Dictatorship over crime.

“That is what Communism does to people,” commented a major after reading about the criminal in the newspaper. He was not joking.

I wasn’t a Commie. As a matter of facts I didn’t have any political ideology. Everything was very confused before the coup and even more confused after. I was a simple person and for me it was difficult to have an opinion. In any case, as I didn’t like the officers anymore, I began to hate the Dictatorship and the Communists began to look nicer to me. I read some of the Manifesto when I was in college. I thought it was complicated and some of my friends called me fascist as a kind of joke. I was not yet a man of thoughts, but a man of numbers. However, that was changing because of Rafael and especially because of the officers. I would have become a Commie if I’d know how to find the headquarters of the banned party.

The Officers’ Club was weird. As if it was from another time or country. The walls were upholstered in a way I only had seen in the movies: it was some kind of purple fabric. The paintings on the walls had golden frames; they were portraits of the heroes of the fatherland or pictures of some battles. While I was working there,

they put a painting of Pinochet in full body and life size. There was a little ceremony for the unveiling and I served champagne while the officers were yelling orders, saluting, and standing straight. All paintings had a small bronze plaque with the title of the painting or the name of the person portrayed. The dictator's portrait was not an exception: "General Augusto José Ramón Pinochet Ugarte, Chief Commander of the Army, President of the Board of Government of Chile," said the plaque. It was the biggest plaque of course. The portrait of the founder of Chile said only his name: Bernardo O'Higgins. Officers always wore uniforms and waiters wore tuxedos. It looked like a scene from *War and Peace*. The music was another issue. Most of the music in Spanish was subversive and the music in English was considered queer; therefore, the only music they listened in the Club were military marches. They were bad old records. Sometimes the officers sang some of the hymns. They made me feel like I was in the movie *Casablanca* when the Nazis started to sing, but nobody answered with the Marseilles. The Chilean military uniform was – is – still a copy of the German one from World War II. German instructors formed our army from the nineteenth century until World War I.

For some reason, Rafael wanted to know all the details. I told him everything I saw and everything I thought. I realized that he was my only friend and I stopped the secrecy in fashion. He was the only person I could talk to. My mother had enough concerns and the rest of the people were scared or partisans of the General. One could never know.

"They want to take the country to the past," Rafael used to say, "and to a past that never existed. They believe in a golden era of heroes that is only in their

imagination. I almost pity them.” He normally said this with a mix of humor and sadness. I didn’t want to ask questions. Not because I was afraid of the spies, but because I wanted to respect his sorrow.

Rafael was certainly a liberal, not a Communist, but he wasn’t afraid of them. He wasn’t a member of any party and probably because of that he was still alive and living in Chile. He was a man deeply compromised with knowledge and freedom.

“This is totally wrong,” he told me once. “A gorilla in power is unacceptable! They are killing people, exiling our fellow citizens and nobody is doing anything about it!” Everybody knew about the killings of the coup itself. But they continued killing and torturing people almost until the end of the Dictatorship. It was Rafael who began to open my eyes, he and then a name without a face: Jaime Correa Tapia, but that happened a little bit later.

It seemed nobody could do anything. The politicians or intellectuals who could were exiled or dead, the military had all the power and the money was in the hands of their partisans. Even the working class of Chile, which was the battle flag of the left, seemed to be happy or at least just all right with everything. They had order, food, especially food. Groceries and other merchants were scarce at the end of President Allende’s administration. There was rationing and black market for the most simple stuff like coffee, sugar and tea. The day after the coup, the stores were full of everything again. Obviously the rich accounted for everything before. I wonder how is it that nobody thought about that. I don’t want to think that the explanation was just that the stomachs were full and there was order. There was too much order, an excess of authority everywhere.

Working at the Club became like being in a parallel world and not in a good one. When I was a waiter at *Génova*, I felt bad because I was displaced from my office to serve tables. But there was Millán, teaching me about the dignity of my humble new profession. At the club for the first time I began to feel like a servant and I didn't like it. I never saw again the captain who recommended me for the job – I knew precisely their ranks now. They said he was somewhere in south. The rest of the officers treated us as things. They never said please. They never asked for anything, they just gave the orders. The waiters were the lowest part of the chain of command. Even the conscripts were more than we were: they were the men; we were just the servitude. I thought it was good for us that only the officers were allowed in the club. If “the men” could go inside, they would be also giving orders to us. I also supposed that working in a military facility would take me out of the black list. Nonetheless, nothing seemed to change for me and I could not figure out the reasons. I believed I was condemned to be a servant for the rest of my life.

Besides Rafael, my mother was the first one who noted it. I had never told her anything since high school. She was a very fragile woman. Only a long time after that I realized she had some kind of depression. In the Chile of the seventies, depression was just not diagnosed; the only people who went to see a psychiatrist were the people who heard voices, and they were taken by force.

“Are you all right, Osvaldito?” she asked me one day. I was not.

“Yes, Mom, of course!” I lied with a fake smile.

“With my salary and the money that your dad left me we can still do well. You don't have to work there,” said my mother. I was surprised.

“It is a good job, Mom,” I lied again.

“Don’t lie to me, son. I’m not that old and certainly I’m not stupid.”

“You have too much imagination, Mom, that’s all!” I said, but she didn’t buy it.

For me she was more efficient in getting information than the intelligence services of the Dictatorship. I was not happy. After all a man just cannot get used to certain things.

That awful day finally came. It was a Friday night. A man came into the club and was not wearing a uniform. They called him “Major” anyway. They ordered the waiters to remain in the kitchen after serving dinner: they didn’t want us to listen. Every night a military truck took us home because of the curfew. One “man” was the only one in the cab and drove it. The waiters had to sit on the benches in the back and we were covered only by a piece of green sailcloth; on winter nights that was awfully cold. That night they told us that there would be an important meeting and we would probably stay late. They would not pay us extra and we could not go home until the meeting was over.

After serving the food, we were all sitting in the kitchen, and after a while we had to talk.

“Anybody knows who is the one in street clothes?” asked one of the guys.

“He has to be a big fish, I guess,” said another one, “a high rank of the DINA.”³

³ DINA was the name of the Dictatorship’s first intelligence service. *Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional* (Direction of National Intelligence). They were known as the guys who made the interrogatories and made people disappear. Their emblem was an iron fist.

“They are making big plans here,” said the chef. This was the only time we said something other than hello or discuss the weather.

A captain came into the kitchen.

“Two waiters only to take the dishes. Then you all can go home,” he said. The waiters looked to each other. We were five on duty, but none of us was sure about anything.

“I’ll go, my captain,” I said.

“I’m in, too, my captain,” said someone else. It was a guy called Norberto.

We went to the dining room. The guy in civilian clothes was behind the counter of the bar and he was serving drinks to the other officers. There were two more guys wearing business suits and sunglasses. It was very late already, about midnight. They looked ridiculous with the sunglasses, but I didn’t dare laugh. If the whole group of waiters had taken the dirty dishes we could do it faster. In any case, we, the waiters, were not supposed to make suggestions and we were nervous; that also slowed us down. Norberto and I were putting everything on our trays, but our trays were too small. The guy in civilian clothes ignored us as if we were not there.

“The problem with these commies,” said the guy, “is that they are so literate! The other day one of my officers told me about a suspicious conversation in a used bookstore.”

“Those bookstores are dens of Communists!” said a major. “I don’t know why we just don’t close all of them!”

“Because we want people to recover the sense of normality,” said the guy in the suit.

“Oh,” said the officer, “I didn’t think about that.”

“And that’s why I am in charge of these operations, because I know how to think.”

“Finish the story!” said another officer. I didn’t know his rank. I was not looking because I was trying to hurry. Norberto and I were putting the dishes on our small trays, but this was a twenty persons dinner and it was really hard to clear the table with just two guys. Somehow I knew that it wasn’t healthy to listen to the story.

“As I said, this lieutenant came with his information about a bookstore –and this is a good one: the name of the bookstore was *Babel*.”

The name of my friend’s bookstore froze my blood.

“Do you know what metonymy is?” asked the guy. I didn’t think it was funny or maybe I did. The thing is I let go a small laugh. “Waiter,” called the man. Norberto and I looked at him. I knew he was calling me. As if it was not clear, he pointed me and said “You, what’s your name?” I was too far for him to read my name tag.

“Osvaldo Chandía Chacón, sir.” The protocol of the Chilean army was to treat the officers by their rank, but this guy was not wearing the uniform, so I was not supposed to know that he was a major.

“What was so funny, *Osvaldo*?” said the guy.

“Nothing, sir, nothing at all,” I answered.

“I’m sure I heard you laugh, *Osvaldo*. Do you think I’m a liar or just stupid?” he asked.

“The guy is just a waiter. Let him go,” said someone else I couldn’t see because my view was fixed on the guy’s chest. We were not supposed to look the officers in the eyes, so we first looked at the shoulder to see the rank and then at their chests.

“You,” said the suit to Norberto, “go home and leave the fucking dishes there!”

“But, sir,” said Norberto, “we are supposed to leave the place clean!”

“Beat it, you mother fucker!” he yelled. “But you stay here and tell me what was so funny,” he told me.

“I already forgot about it, sir!” I said and it was true.

“You better remember, you fucking faggot,” he said. Faggot was bad, but not as bad as commie. He also showed a gun under his jacket.

“I know what a metonymy is! That was all, sir,” I said.

“What is it?” asked a voice from behind.

“It is the replacement of one word for another in a speech or poem,” I answered as if I was the best kid of the class, “Like when you say ‘sword’ instead of ‘arms’ or ‘pen’ instead of ‘writing’.”

“Did I ask you what metonymy was?” asked the guy who was showing his gun.

“No, sir,” I answered.

“Why did you answer then? This an intimate conversation between you and me.”

"Because I am supposed to be at service of the officers who come here, sir," I claimed.

"Wise answer, *Osvaldo*," said the guy, "but the problem is that I don't like wise guys! Do you know why I don't like wise guys?"

I did not answer.

"Because commies are wise guys who read too many books, like Don Quixote. The problem is that they don't turn into a crazy old man on a horse, but they turn into traitors who want to sell the country to the fucking Soviet Union," he continued. "I think you are a mother fucker communist who has no fatherland and no God."

I preferred to be called faggot than Communist. Being a Communist was bad, really bad.

"I swear to God that I am good Catholic, even though I don't go to mass that often, sir, and I hate those fucking Commies, sir," I lied.

"I don't know," he said. "How is it that you know what metonymy is? You are just a fucking pitiful waiter, for Christ sake!"

"Yes, I am sir," I said. Incredibly I was less afraid. I was angry, absolutely angry, but I still had my brains working to understand that I was risking my life. Until this point I just didn't like the Dictatorship, but I was about to learn that it was something absolutely wrong. Of course that was not the moment to be heroic.

"And how is it that a fucking pitiful waiter knows the meaning of a one million pesos word?" he asked.

"I happen to like poetry, sir, mostly Huidobro," I had the cold blood to avoid mentioning the Communist Neruda.

“You like poetry,” said the guy. “You fucking faggot!”

The guy hit me on my face. I fell down and I felt feet kicking me like hell. I tried to protect my head. As a ‘faggot’ I earned only a beating-up. If he thought I was a Communist I could not tell the story.

“You are just a fucking, pitiful waiter! You are not supposed to overhear the conversation of an officer! You are less than a man and you are not supposed to read fucking poetry, because all poets are fucking Communist!” Said the guy while he kicked me.

“He is just one of our waiters, for Christ sake, stop it!” said someone. I guess he was a senior officer, because he finished with. “It’s an order!”

“I am not anymore under the chain of command of the army, Colonel. I am only under the orders of my General Sanchez⁴,” said the man while he was still beating me. Someone walked in front him. I didn’t know who he was. I couldn’t see clearly.

“Ok, but I will inform my General about this incident if this doesn’t stop right now. Osvaldo is one of our waiters and he is neither a Commie nor a faggot,” said the fuzzy silhouette.

The guy in the suit suddenly stopped.

“We don’t need to fight because of a fucking waiter, do we?” he said.

⁴ This is the name that appeared in Osvaldo’s notes. Regardless, I strongly believe that the general mentioned was in fact General Manuel Contreras. I also believe that the guy in the suit was Álvaro Corvalán, who directed the CNI after Contreras. The CNI was the successor of DINA when it was dissolved. There is no reason to keep these names in secret; these men are now in prison because of their crimes against humanity. However, I kept the names given by Osvaldo, because I could not corroborate my suspicions.

"Not if this finishes right now," said the fuzzy officer.

"Ok, maybe I went too far," said the guy in civilian clothes, "but don't expect me to apologize to a fucking waiter."

"I don't expect that, Esteban," said the officer. I will remember that name for the rest of my life.

The fuzzy officer looked at my face.

"Are you alright, Osvaldo?" he said and he was transformed into Colonel Quinteros, the commander of the whole unit.

I nodded, but I didn't feel well.

"Please go to the kitchen," he said. The word 'please' sounded weird. These guys just gave orders and never asked for anything saying please. I couldn't stand up.

"Captain Martinez, help this man," ordered the Colonel.

"Me?" asked Captain Martinez. He listened correctly, but he didn't understand the order: he was being instructed to help a servant.

"Yes, you," said the Colonel.

"Yes, my Colonel!" said the captain and he helped me because he was obeying orders and not because he cared. I noticed this, because he put me on my feet without any care and it hurt.

"This meeting is over, gentlemen," said the colonel. I heard the salutes and the military shoes standing at attention. Then Captain Martinez left me sitting on a chair in the kitchen. I was already alone. I went to the refrigerator and took some ice. I put it in a plastic bag and then on my face. The face felt better, but the spirit felt

worse. I went to the door to overhear what was happening in the dinning room. That was not a wise move, but I needed to make some sense of what happened. Esteban and the two guys in civilian clothes were still there.

“How can you be that brutal?” asked the Colonel.

“We are living in extraordinary times, Colonel, and you know it,” said Esteban. “Extraordinary measures have to be taken. And don’t dare call me brutal again!”

“And how in hell that includes beating a waiter of the Officers’ Club, Major?” the Colonel seemed to have some common sense.

“Well, maybe I went too far,” said Esteban and he sounded as if he broke a vase by accident, or as if he missed a stoplight. I felt the enormous weight of my irrelevance.

“If you were under my command you would be degraded,” said the Colonel.

“But I am not under your command, Quinteros. I am a civilian now and I am not part of your chain of command anymore. I receive orders from Pinochet and General Sanchez only.” Esteban didn’t use the formal ‘my Colonel’ and treated Quinteros by his last name. That was an open challenge and also a show of power.

“Well, *sir*,” said the Colonel with emphasis in ‘sir’. The word ‘sir’ was used exclusively to refer a civilian, “let’s forget the incident then.”

“I think that’s the best, Colonel,” said Esteban. Treating the Colonel by his rank was a show of respect, but by not saying “my Colonel,” he wasn’t recognizing his authority over him. Military titles and men can be so subtle sometimes.

Both men said goodbye and I went back to my chair. It wasn't intelligent to be caught overhearing again.

"I beg you to accept my sincere apologizes for the behavior of that person," said the Colonel. A simple mortal like me was not supposed to receive apologizes from an officer. I tried to answer, but my lips were swollen. I just nodded. "I will take you home," he said and this was another incredible honor. I babbled my address.

He personally drove the car. It was a Mercedes and it was assigned to him because of his rank. He also had a chauffer, but he drove personally because he didn't want rumors about my beating-up. I was sitting in the front seat and I still had my plastic bag with ice on my face. It began to drip, but the Colonel didn't say anything about the water on the seats.

"I will give you the rest of the month off with full salary," said the Colonel. He was the only one who tipped in the club, even though he wasn't very generous.

"Thank you, my Colonel," I said. I was able to talk by then, but it still hurt.

"I beg you to understand," said the Colonel. "We are living in hard times and people like Esteban get nervous."

"Yes, my Colonel," I said. There was not anything else to say to an officer.

"However, he shouldn't treat you as only Communists have to be treated," he said. I looked at him. I realized if I had said Neruda instead of Huidobro, I could be in jail or even dead, instead of being chauffeured home by a Colonel in person.

Torturing Commies was now ok. Neruda died just after the coup. Many people said that he died of sadness because of the failure of Chilean democracy. The truth is he

was already very ill. His funeral was the only massive act of the left that happened right after Pinochet's coup, and even the army didn't dare to intervene in the procession. I wish I was there, but by then I was not especially concerned about politics and Rafael had not cultivated my taste in poetry yet. I had not a Nobel Prize; therefore I would not have the same respect that Neruda's body had. I decided to quit my job at the club after the two weeks that remained till the end of the month. I preferred being unemployed instead of experiencing the fear and the humiliation. I didn't say anything in the Colonel's car. He didn't talk to me anymore – I was supposed to talk only if officers talked to me.

The streets were deserted except for some army checkpoints. The light inside the car was on as it was dictated by curfew protocol. Some soldiers, a lieutenant or a sub officer, one or two jeeps, or maybe a truck composed a checkpoint. They seemed modest, but the soldiers had orders to kill whoever disobeyed them. People were not supposed to be out at night without a good reason. In addition to the checkpoints, there were troops patrolling the streets. They had the reputation of shooting before asking. However, when we passed by one of those, the soldiers already knew we were passing by and they saluted our car without stopping it. For the first time, I realized that the world was different for certain people. There was this Colonel – just a regular guy and even a good fellow – being saluted by troops and convinced that he was special and righteous. Regardless, he was nothing special. He was just a soldier who would never be in that position of authority without the coup: right man, right place and right moment. The only difference between him and me was that he was lucky.

As we passed by the checkpoints and the city lights, I realized that Santiago was absolutely pretty at night. The bohemia of the city was once legendary. Even though I wasn't a bohemian, before the coup I used to stay Fridays until midnight drinking wine somewhere with the colleagues. We didn't have a specific place. Confitería Torres was always in fashion at Alameda Avenue from the 1800s; it was kind of classy. They never changed the decoration until the 2000s. I guess they had to do it because it was impossible to restore it anymore; someone told me they preserved the style. The place had round tables and wooden chairs made by a company in Vienna during the nineteenth century. Those chairs are the models for the classic café chair, but later they made them of steel. I learned about those details because my mother who loved antiques. On weekends they had bolero and tango singers. We used to go there the night of the payday or maybe to the Bimbambum, a place where they had dancers and more elaborate shows. I went there just once, because my girlfriend didn't let me go and frankly because it was rather expensive. The place had crystal chandeliers, red upholstery – I guess; it was always almost dark – but that kind of place was for legitimate bohemians, not for a guy like me. However, in normal days my colleagues preferred cheaper places with no stages. They liked to talk about revolution and changing the world. For that, any of the thousand places of downtown Santiago was ok: Nuria restaurant, Dante's, or places whose name I forgot if they had any name; we went mostly to that kind of place because we were not rich. There was nothing remarkable about places like that, except for the wine, the beer, and the conversation. We used to walk there from our work among the bright signs of the stores, and the people who looked for fun.

There was also a place with drag queens called Carlina, but I never had the guts to go there. Its popularity was amazing in such a conservative society. My colleagues said that it was a decadent capitalist place, but I believe they didn't have the guts to go either. They were the same colleagues that didn't talk to me anymore after I was fired, because talking to me could be dangerous and people were afraid. By the time I was working for the army, the contact was already broken and we didn't have any Facebook in those days.

That night, only the streetlights were on. It was completely pointless to turn on signs that nobody would look at. The night took my mind to the day I missed my job at the Department of Housing. It was a modest, obscure and anonymous position, but I felt I had some dignity even though I wasn't anybody – fortunately; if I happened to be someone, I would be exiled or even dead. I was only the last accountant of the Department. My sin was I entered with a reference of a professor who happened to be a Socialist. I even lasted two years in my position during the Dictatorship.

One day my boss just came to me with a blue envelope and said, "I'm very sorry." The blue envelope was the sign of being fired. Nobody told me anything else, but it wasn't necessary. I knew what was all about.

The custom was – and I guess still is – that coworkers should organize a dinner if somebody left the job. When somebody was fired, the dinner was changed into a drinking night in a bar. However, when they fired me, my colleagues barely said goodbye and then they looked the other way. I should realize that I was degraded to being less than a person then and not only after the beating. I wasn't

dangerous, but just annoying. It was not even because of myself, but because of professor Maturana who was just a nice small guy. He was always wearing a blue suit and a brown coat in winter. His classes used to be a little bit monotonous and kind of boring. As I wasn't a rich boy and I needed to be in the working force as soon as possible, I used to sit in the first row and to ask many questions to avoid falling asleep. He appreciated my enthusiasm and that's why he gave me the reference for the Department of Housing. I began in the lowest position out of Santiago as it was the common practice and because professor Maturana was not a big leader in the Socialist party. He was just an old, lonely, and good man with good intentions. There used to be many lonely men in the seventies and before. I don't know if professor Maturana was just single, a widower, or a betrayed man like Rafael. Lonely old men used to share some kind of smell or aura. I never knew about him anymore after the coup, but that was so typical. I hope he ended his days by natural causes.

Many of my former classmates had important positions in the Dictatorship. Many of them were right wing and the public service was full of empty positions like the one left by me, and some others in higher places. I was one of the best students, but that was not difficult. My major wasn't fancy and the rich boys who entered there did it because they were too lazy to study something more demanding. How many of them were then in good jobs with the government or the corporations? I called and many of them answered me with false promises or gave me evasive answers. Some others didn't even answer the phone.

I don't remember if we passed three or two checkpoints that night, but all of them were informed about the Colonel and they didn't stop the car. Inside we remained silent and my mind found nothing else to do but remember better days.

My first girlfriend was a student of nursery teaching while I was in the Universidad Técnica. I don't know why I remembered her inside the car. Her name was Pamela and she was reasonably pretty, black hair, brown eyes, and was two years younger than me. It wasn't a huge difference, but at that age, that turned her into a baby: her parents didn't allow her to be out too late and her father always gave me his intimidating look. It worked because I was a virgin boy from a male school who had no experience with girls or love. I guess I remembered her because she was the most normal person I ever met in that country. When I finished college, I moved to Concepción because of my new job; after a few romantic letters and four trips on weekends, we finished our relationship because of a reason I cannot recall; maybe it was just the distance. The funny thing is that they put me back in Santiago just after that, but she was already dating another guy by then. People used to marry very young. In Concepción I lived in a rented room and I was in charge of a small unit of the department. I was the boss and I felt important. I was in charge of people much older than me and they called me "sir". I didn't make many friends because I was in position of authority and my own boss was much older than I was. In Santiago they paid me a little less, because they paid me extra in Concepción for the room, and I became the last official of the Department of Housing. However, being in Santiago was supposed to be the next step for a promotion and I was very happy. Then I became a waiter.

Until the beating, I managed to remain happy earning not much money. I adapted to the curfew, the unfair rules, and I survived. My rich and mediocre classmates had good jobs, beautiful wives and even cars – having a car was a luxury in Chile in the seventies. That night, however, I learned that my life was worthless and so were the lives of most of my fellow citizens who were not in the right side. The rest of us were just outsiders or *profanes*, as they said in the Astrum Aureum Society. That night, however, I didn't even know about the Astrum Aureum Society. I had no friend but Rafael, and he was almost as low as I was. It was impossible for me to have a girlfriend or just plain friends again. Pamela, Emilia, the guys from college, or my former colleagues didn't want to be seen around me anymore. With a little bit of persuasion, I could perfectly take a rifle and become a guerrilla fighter or shoot myself. But that was also useless. I looked at the last checkpoint and I imagined the soldiers were firing their guns against me, instead of saluting the car.

The car stopped in front of my building and I came back from my imaginary travel to better times.

"We will say that you are ill and we will not mention this incident," sentenced the Colonel.

"Yes, my Colonel." Long before, I had realized I could not say anything else.

"Please understand that this is for your own safety," said the Colonel, "that guy became a very powerful person."

"Yes, my Colonel."

"You are dismissed," he finally said and he recovered his commanding tone.

"Good bye."

“Good bye, my Colonel,” I said. I was not allowed to make the military salutation: I was just a servant.

I lived with my mother in a four-story building, and we lived on the top floor. As the rule was that buildings with five or more floors had to have elevators, our building didn’t have any. I climbed the stairs in some pain, but it wasn’t that bad anymore. However, it took me a while. At that age I used to run the stairs because I was young and healthy. Some neighbors opened the door to look on the second and the third floor. A guy walking late at night – it was about midnight – wasn’t a common thing because of the curfew. I guessed that some neighbors were afraid of DINA because they were left wing, but I didn’t really know. I was still wearing my tuxedo. My white jacket had some bloodstains and was dirty because of the kicking.

I said hello when the neighbors opened the door, but nobody answered. Even though some of them lived in the building for many years and they perfectly knew who I was. I’m sure they wanted to say hello and even to help. But helping a beaten man was also dangerous: only the military was doing the beatings and beaten guys were possible Communists.

I went first to Rafael’s apartment. I didn’t want my mother to see me in that condition, and she used to wait until I was home to start sleeping. I knocked on the door, but nobody opened. I thought that he could be asleep, but after I knocked for a while I realized that he wasn’t at home. I panicked. People had to be at home after the curfew. I don’t remember if I cried or maybe I did and I am ashamed about confessing it. Nevertheless, I couldn’t show panic or tears in front of my mom, so I forced myself to calm down and I went home.

I finally got home and put the key in the lock. I wanted to go to my bed and maybe cry. I was so afraid for my most faithful friend that I forgot my own pain.

“Surprise!” said my mother and Rafael. It was my birthday. They had organized the party. Well, a party of three people, but still a party. I was surprised, but they were even more surprised when they saw me.

“What happened!” asked my mother.

“I fell down,” I lied, but, as she used to say, she was not stupid.

“Why did they beat you?” she asked.

“For no reason.” I told the truth this time.

“How could they beat you without any reason!” asked my mother.

“Oh, they can,” said Rafael. “They can do whatever they want.”

My mother cleaned my face. They made me lie on the sofa. The pain in my face diminished, but the pain in my soul grew to impossible heights. There I was, beaten and being nobody. I wanted to scream, I wanted to find that Esteban guy and beat him to death. I had some fistfights in high school and I was always able to defend myself, but this was different. If I fought back, I would be dead. I didn’t scream, cry or destroy anything just because of my mother. Protecting the weaker is the best source of strength.

“You did what you had to do to stay alive,” said Rafael. “Please don’t feel bad about yourself.”

I nodded. I noticed my mother was trembling.

“Isn’t this a party?” I said. “I want my presents and my piece of cake now!”

Then I smiled and my mother smiled with me.

They lighted the candle and sang Happy Birthday. I faked my happiness until I felt really happy. I was happy because my mother was happy, and happy because I knew that Rafael was a good friend. At the beginning I said that this was the saddest day of my life. It is true, but it was also one of the happiest.

Rafael gave me *General Chant* by Neruda. It had his autograph and also a Rafael wrote something: "they could cut all flowers, but they could not stop the spring." The phrase was Neruda's, but the words, "remember, my dear Friend" were Rafael's. Nothing could be more proper for that moment.

"You want me to get killed," I said, and this time I couldn't avoid a tear.

"Just hide it well," he said. I think I saw a tear too. But Chilean guys of those times were still macho men.

My mother came with a small box. I opened it and I saw just a small pin. One of those the guys use on the jacket flap.

"This is a very curious symbol," I said.⁵ It had the words 'Astrum Aureum Society' written in very small fonts. The word Society was in English. I had no idea what it was and I didn't suspect that it would change my life forever.

"They told me it was for good luck," said my mother.

"Let me see that," said Rafael. "Where did you find this?"

"At the flea market," answered my mother.

My mom loved the flea market. It was her Sunday walk every week. She always bought the most extravagant things, like those images of the Buddha and a

⁵ For security reasons, I cannot describe the emblem of the Astrum Aurum Society. Osvaldo didn't do it in his own narration and I will not add the detail, as he instructed me.

menorah in which she liked to light candles in random days – we were not Jewish and she was a devoted Catholic. She just thought the menorah was pretty.

“This is silver,” said Rafael.

“That’s what the vendor told me,” said my mother. “I didn’t believe it was true, but I thought the pin was pretty anyway. Maybe it could bring you good luck!”

My mom had champagne and Rafael had some pisco. We drank it and it burned our throat. I had my next drink of pisco mixed with coke. Mom drank only champagne and she got sleepy. She was never a good drinker. I got my talent for drinking from my dad, I guess. He died when I was very young and I couldn’t tell.

After I quit the Officers' Club, nobody asked any questions. They even paid me a little extra, even though it was a derisory amount. I wanted to say goodbye to Colonel Quinteros, but they said that he wasn't at his office for some reason I cannot recall. I was convinced he just didn't want to see me. I thought that was the best. I couldn't stop thinking about what would have happened if I said Neruda instead of Huidobro: that was just a flash of thinking. I guessed it came because a deep part of my unconscious mind was more aware of danger than I was. Otherwise, all the Colonel's apparent humanism and sense of justice would vanish and I would be under the power of that DINA psycho and probably dead. I didn't want to see him in my life again; I didn't want to see anyone else with that kind of power again.

Rafael gave me a job. He paid me for half a day, but I used to stay the whole day at the bookstore just because I liked it, and because I desperately needed to use my time. There is nothing worse than unemployment, not even a mortal disease like the one I have now. There was an unbearable feeling of failure and of being worthless in being unemployed. Being the victim of injustice was no consolation: I also felt powerless. Helping Rafael or being there just to talk to him made me feel better, much better and almost fine. Besides, I learned that conversation with wise men like him is always beneficial, and Rafael was one of the most brilliant men I ever met – and later I had met some brilliant men and women. I knew that hiring me was a major effort for him. The sales were not great and the business could survive only because the owner was a lonely man, and also because he had a pay phone outside that made much more money than the whole store. In those conversations

Rafael never talked too much about himself. Nevertheless, he had to tell me once about his son in the south. He didn't know too much about him: first he was living in hiding, as many people were. He told me about him because that day he received a letter from Sweden.

His son was a Philosophy teacher like him, and a more convinced Socialist. He took refuge into the Swedish embassy. He couldn't pay a visit to his father and he only wrote him after being safe in Stockholm. Rafael read the letter for me. It was short and kind, but cold:

Dear Father,

Because of the reasons we all know, I finally had to leave the country. I hope I will be supporting the armed resistance from here and I also hope that you will be all right there. I will not tell you about my mother because I know that it makes you angry, but I will say she happens to be all right.

It's funny how I remember the full letter, but I forgot the name of his son. Rafael never talked too much about him and never about his mother. The only time I knew that woman existed was when I read about her from the letter. He never told me if he was married to his mother or if they were just lovers. The only clear thing was he didn't approve of his son's radical options.

"Besides, violence is useful only if you have the power to win," he told me once. "If not you are just spreading useless suffering."

I met Rafael's son once, after my friend's death and during my own exile. I was so emotional about meeting the only son of the best friend I ever had, but it was

a total disappointment. His face was very similar, but it had no shadow of the depth of his father's, nor the brightness of his eyes. Some years after the Dictatorship, he wanted to go back to Chile. He told me he never adapted to Sweden very well. His father gave him my number before he died and he contacted me for a job. We met in Adams Morgan, on 18th Street, the bohemian neighborhood of DC. He was the son of my late friend and I wanted to buy him a drink. The Rumba Café was a cliché among Latinos, but I thought it was ok for him because he was coming from Sweden. We went there early and on a business day. As it was too hot we went inside. One of the walls of the place was covered by masks of the devil, and the other by sacred images of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. They put one-dollar bills in the holes of both kinds of images. I guess that there were at least two hundred dollars on those walls. We sat there under the sight of God and the devils. I remember the impression that place made on me, and how it reminded me my own life, being ok with good and evil, truth and falsehood, and comfortably surviving. I expected some clever remark from the son of the cleverest friend I had. But nothing happened.

“Dad always spoke very well of you, however he never told me anything specific,” he said.

“There isn't much to tell,” I lied. “I just came to the United States to make a living.”

“You did it quite well!” he said. “The myth of the self made man is true.”

“No, it is not,” I said. “I was just very, very lucky.”

“Don't be modest,” he said. “Not many people are able to get where you got!”

“I met many people better than me, like your father. They just didn’t make it and not because their lack of abilities. Life is very unfair.”

“I used to think like that,” he said. “But if people are poor, it is because they are lazy. They sit there doing nothing and wait for help from the Government...”

He continued with a speech well known to me. He was talking like the rich people who really believed that life was fair and beautiful. It was like being in front of a perfect partisan of the old General. I don’t know if he talked like that because he thought I was a Republican, or if he did actually think that way. After a while I didn’t want to know. Maybe I am being unfair comparing him with his father. Maybe he was just a guy like me, who did whatever it took to survive. Somehow my mind forgot his name. He didn’t know anything about the Astrum Aureum because his father didn’t trust him. I think he is doing some office work somewhere in Chile. I cannot recall where he ended and I didn’t want to see him again.

That day in the Rumba Café I asked him about his father and his relationship with his mother.

“Mom got tired of him,” he said, “that was what happened. I cannot even imagine how Mom could marry the old cuckold.”

I wished his own wife to abandon him and then I abandoned the meeting as fast as I could. I gave him some phone numbers in Chile and then I pretended I had something to do. He flew the next day, so I didn’t have to meet him again. After paying the bill I left. I wondered how a guy like him could study something like philosophy. Finding the reason for that required a whole new conversation and I didn’t want to hear it. Life is too short, as I am brutally realizing now. I have to admit

that he maybe was just a grotesque reflection of myself: a liar. Nevertheless, I never lied to myself; I was already a liar during most of my life. Was that man lying to me or to himself? Sometimes knowing the heart of a man is impossible.

While I was working in *Babel*, I started to wear the pin my mom gave me. I never was especially superstitious, but I needed good luck and the pin worked. The first signal of the change in my luck was that the blonde I chased the first time I entered the bookstore came back. I was working there, so she had to talk to me.

“Do you have the *Corpus Hermeticum*?” she asked.

“I don’t think so, I answered, “that’s a very rare book.” I guessed, but at the time I only thought that the title of the book was weird and I didn’t know anything about it. Besides, her big green eyes were looking at me in a way in which a woman never looked at me before or after.

“You are a member!” said the girl suddenly.

“Excuse me?” I said. I was so nervous.

“A brother,” she said in some mysterious tone and touched my pin.

“Oh, no,” I said, “my mom bought this at the flea market and gave it to me for my birthday. She said it was for good luck.” I didn’t know that the pin was the most important signal the brothers used for recognizing each other.

The girl looked into my eyes and I then I thought that her wonderful green eyes were even more wonderful. I never felt something like that in front of a woman again.

“That is the most clever excuse I’ve ever heard!” she laughed. She showed me her arm and she had the same symbol on my pin drawn on the inner part of her elbow.

“How is that?” I exclaimed. I was surprised because she had the same symbol drew on her arm. I didn’t know what the symbol was about. She wet her finger – I thought her mouth was also really sexy – and passed it over the drawing and it began to disappear. In those years I was a little bit shy and women usually made me nervous. Some of them thought that it was funny, and because of that I was not a virgin when that gorgeous angel came from heaven and talked to me.

“Relax, this is not the actual ritual tattoo of the Astrum Aureum,” she said showing the sadness of a toddler who doesn’t get her candy, “I know you only accept men in the Society. I drew this using a Maybelline blue eyeliner.”

Rafael was gone because he saw the blonde and he wanted to give me some privacy. He did that every time a beautiful young woman entered in the store. I had to do the same in the case of beautiful older women. That was our agreement. I never took it seriously, but it gave me some practice in the art of talking to beautiful women. I had only had two girlfriends before and I really needed some help with my communication skills.

“Some day the Astrum Aureum Society will have to accept women in it,” said the girl.

“The Astrum Aureum Society?” I repeated, “What’s that society about?”

“Relax, what’s your name?” she asked and I told her. “I know everything about the Astrum Aureum Society, my father is the new Great Master.”

"Is there a new Great Master?" I asked this because I didn't know even what else to ask.

"Oh, my God!" she said. "You are one of the lost brothers!"

"No, I'm not," I said.

"Please stop faking!" said the girl, "I know everything about the chapter in Concepción city. The coup made a total mess there and the brothers were dispersed. Many of them ran away because of the political situation."

The girl took out a little journal, and wrote a name and a phone number and then she tore the page and gave it to me.

"This is the name of my father and his home phone number – it's also my number if you are interested, I'm Cristina – call him," The girl smiled at me and it felt like a glimpse to a new better world. "The Society is completely active again in a new building and there is nothing to fear anymore. We have people inside this administration also – well, you have, I'm not an actual member. So the brothers who were hiding can go to the new *Old Temple of Stonehenge*. They are calling everyone, the apprentices, the officials, and the masters."

"I have nothing to do with any Astrum Aureum, Cristina," I said with a smile. Though I was nervous, I found the whole situation very funny.

"Of course not," she said and blinked an eye. "I will be waiting for your call."

Wearing her blue dress and her gorgeous legs, the girl went out and I had her number and the name of her father.

"How did you do with the blonde?" asked Rafael when he came back to the store. He was smoking his pipe and his tobacco smelled fine. He didn't smoke his pipe often, because the economy made pipe tobacco still too expensive.

"I've got a phone number," I said.

"Wonderful! It's just not sane for a man of your age to be alone," said my friend, "neither for a man of my age. That girl was gorgeous by the way! You are lucky I am an old man already!"

For some reason I didn't tell Rafael about what happened with Cristina. My mind felt strange. I strongly believed that I was in love already. I was an accountant, a practical and worldly man – not that I had much world – and I fell in love at first sight with a beautiful girl.

"The girl wanted the *Corpus Hermeticum*," was the only thing I told him at that point. I didn't tell him about the Astrum Aureum. I wonder why I didn't.

"Wow! What a reading for such a young and pretty girl! She won't find it and if she does, it will be rather expensive," he said.

"Do you know that book?" I asked.

"I know about it," he began. "*The Corpus Hermeticum* is a group of old books attributed to a Hermes Trismegistus. The consensus is that they are from the second century. They are a mix of Platonic, Neo-Platonic, Pre-Socratic, and even Christian doctrines. It is related also to alchemy and things like that."

"Have you ever read it?" I asked.

"There is a copy in English in the Catholic University and once I read a little bit of it," said Rafael. "It was interesting for a while, but then it turned repetitive."

"I wonder why Cristina wanted it," I thought aloud.

"You have her name and number!" celebrated Rafael. "But I have to tell you that she is a witch."

"All women are witches, you say that all the time!" I laughed.

"I mean a magician, a sorcerer, an alchemist, or something like that." Rafael stopped laughing. "People who read Hermes are normally that kind of people."

"Do you think there is something to fear?" I asked. Hermetics were not popular in Chile in the seventies. Marx was popular and also the revolution. The New Age was far from our land because the people had more mundane concerns. They told me Chile had its share of that in the eighties.

"I don't think so," said Rafael. "Maybe some card reading or some allegedly spiritual, boring meetings."

My mother was a devoted Catholic and for a while I thought I was Catholic too. I always was too concerned about secular matters like finding a job – I never stopped my pointless ritual of resume sending – and saving money for the house. Then politics became a new topic that mattered. Spirituality was never my strongest point, and frankly it isn't my strongest point even now that I am the former Great Master of the most important chapter of the Astrum Aureum Society, and about to die. The Brotherhood will want my body to be in a crypt they have in Virginia for the Great Masters. I had arranged my cremation just for fun. If there is an afterlife, I will love to see their faces from there.

"What do you think about those people?" I asked Rafael. "Is there any kind of magic or secret somewhere?"

“Well, those books are far too old to be taken seriously these days, but some people still believe that there is a secret spiritual power in Hermes’ teachings,” answered Rafael. “What I found valuable there was not different from what I found in Plato, Aristotle, Heraclitus and some other philosophers of ancient times.”

“I wish I could know about that,” I said. My only spiritual experiences were my religion class at school and also some Sunday school at some parish. Both were infantile and prosaic. I was a neophyte even in reading poetry. I didn’t know it yet, but loving Cristina would be the first and the only rich spiritual experience of my life.

“I’m sure that this Carolina,” he said mistakenly.

“It’s Cristina,” I corrected.

“This Miss whatever,” he ended the discussion, “will introduce you into a world of secrets and magic, my friend. You probably will be turned into a magician. She is probably the member of some order of initiated.”

“Initiated? What are they initiated into?” I asked.

“Into the great mysteries, of course!” answered Rafael. He was imitating Vincent Price and he was a little bit creepy. “They have to pass a ceremony called the *initiation* and only then they are authorized to study the *secrets*.”

“What secrets?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said changing his voice to a normal one. “I am not an initiated. But I guess they have wonderful *secrets*.”

“Are you mocking me, Rafael?”

"A little bit, yeah, but these orders exist somewhere and they claim to have *secrets*. Personally, I don't give a shit for their secrets, but if such a beautiful sorcerer asked me to a secret society, I would be an initiated right then, my young friend!

Paris is well worth a mass!"

I laughed, but I didn't tell him about the Astrum Aureum, even though he was certainly much more aware than me of the esoteric world –his awareness was nothing compared with what I found later. However, then I didn't even understand what he had tried to say with the mass in Paris. We used to close half an hour before the curfew at nine o'clock. Most of the people had left downtown much earlier and only the inhabitants of the center were doing whatever they were doing, except for buying books. Although I was employed half time and I was working half a day for free, I asked Rafael for permission to go a little earlier.

"What about our wine!" he said. Sometimes we used to drink some wine after we closed and went home. The back door of the store gave into our building, therefore we didn't have to worry about the curfew.

"Save it for tomorrow," I said.

"You will dump your old friend for a beautiful blond witch!" he laughed.

My only answer was a smile.

"Go and reproduce yourself! Your genes are pretty valuable, my friend! Go and continue the cycle of life!" That was his blessing.

I will not deny that I wanted to follow the command of my nature. I had been almost two years or some eternity without any normal or abnormal satisfaction.

It was the middle of June and it was cold and grey. Most of the men wore suits and blue coats. It was difficult to distinguish their suits from the uniforms of the students. I wore an imitation black leather jacket. It scarcely protected me from the weather, but at least I looked different from the other men. Most of the women wore pants in winter and the miniskirts would not return until some decades after. Nobody smiled in downtown, people were busy and they were running to catch the buses to arrive home. The curfew was too early and the transportation was too slow. That's why almost nobody dined at the restaurants, but I was one of the privileged who lived downtown. An inherited privilege I had from better times of my family and my country. The small apartment I shared with my mother was a relic from the time when my father was alive and he was a young judge. Downtown wasn't what it was before. The rich families were migrating to the east of the city and in downtown remained only their decadent poor relatives or the survivors of good lineages; like my mom and me: we were impoverished by the death of my father and my bad luck, but still proudly middle class, a shabby-genteel remain of a family which was not intimidated in front of the rich. The new neighborhoods were becoming a bubble for the rich. Mannered, expensive, and non-alcoholic tearooms replaced the old bohemian life of the downtown. I guess that mothers and wives were happy about this, and I was certain that the rich were absolutely happy about the Dictatorship. Pinochet was the General of Hope who brought order to the fatherland. A new neighborhood called Providencia became the new downtown for the rich. I think it was because the center was too grey, and the ruins of La Moneda –the Government

Palace– became a too bad memory. But downtown Santiago was my neighborhood. I had to pass near the closed ruins of La Moneda to go to where I was going.

I wonder what I was thinking. Was it just that I had been too much alone and I desperately wanted to be with Cristina? My birthday party had only my mom and my boss as guests, and it was right after an intelligence officer beat the hell out of me for no reason. Now I think I was just alone, desperate, and in love, but then I was acting by some unknown impulse. I never was impulsive before or after that day. I was walking fast because one part of me knew where I was going. Finally I realized that I was walking to the drugstore. Its windows showed some unknown products and there were many pictures of girls smiling with the *Pepsodent* smile. There was this commercial on TV that showed beautiful girls walking by the streets in a sunny day. Men and women turned to look at every one of them and they said, “That girl has *Pep!*” Then the brand of the toothpaste appeared on the screen and a song ordered, “You should have *Pep/* you should look *Pep/* a *Pepsodent* smile!” I didn’t believe in the smile of the *Pep* girls, but I went into the drugstore anyway.

After being so long without a woman and being almost a virgin, I was very nervous at the cosmetics section of the drugstore. A beautiful brunette came and asked me what I wanted. She was very kind, but I felt like a kid who was exploring his mother’s dressing table.

“I want a blue Maybelline eyeliner, please,” I said as if I was a kid reciting his first poem by heart.

“Here they are,” she said and there were a thousand of different colors, but only six were Maybelline and blue.

“Oh my God!” I said and made the girl laugh.

“At least you are brave enough to come and buy this stuff!” said the girl. “My boyfriend doesn’t even come into the store to pick me up.”

A normal man would act exactly like her boyfriend in those times. True Chilean machos just learned they had to use deodorant a few years ago. Before, using it was considered effeminate and traveling by bus could be a tragic experience.

“I don’t know which is the one she uses,” I said.

“She is a blonde, isn’t she?” asked the brunette.

“Yes she is!” I exclaimed. “How did you know?”

“Blue eyeliner just doesn’t look good on brunettes,” she said. “It looks too artificial.” I wondered how a blue line surrounding the eye of a girl could look natural. I didn’t know if her criterion was a universal truth or just an opinion.

“If she is conservative,” said the girl, “she would use this light blue, but if she wants to call attention, she would prefer this other.” The vendor pointed two pencils that looked just the same for me.

“And the other four?” I asked.

“Those are slight variations between these two,” said the girl and I bought them all. Before that day I’d never learned how much looking good cost a woman.

I arrived home at the usual time and my mother was waiting for me with dinner. I don’t remember what she cooked, probably some rice, egg, and salad.

“How, was your day, son?” asked my mom as usual.

“Nothing especially remarkable. Well, I met a girl at the bookstore and she gave me her phone number.” She didn’t need any torture to GET the truth from me.

“Don’t call her tonight, call her tomorrow! Women hate men when they are too desperate!” my mother began and I almost regretted telling her. She gave me all her advice for her old-fashioned courtship rituals. I said yes to everything. I didn’t tell her about the Astrum Aureum because my mother believed that even Freemasons worshiped Satan. If I told her something remotely related to the occult, she couldn’t sleep even with her sleeping pills.

“And how was your day, Mom?” I asked, trying to stop her from planning my wedding.

“Oh my God!” she said. Her euphoria turned into sadness. “It’s horrible!” she continued.

“The kids are giving you bad times?” I innocently asked.

“The kids are always the same and I am an old teacher who knows well how to manage them,” she said. “People are scared, the teachers fear their own colleagues and even the children! ‘I will tell the director that you are a commie, Mrs. Chacón,’ a boy told me. It was a joke, but I was terrified. I never felt that disempowered in front of a boy in my class! I don’t know how my face looked, because the boy said sorry and then he said, ‘it was just a joke, Mrs. Chacón. I would never turn you to the police.’ Then there was silence. You know how difficult it is for a high school teacher to achieve silence in the classroom. But I didn’t like that silence. That was not the silence of an interested class, but the silence of fear. I

wanted them to start throwing papers and making some noise, but they were just silent.”

“Too bad,” I said and I knew that it was not the most intelligent response to what she told me, but nothing else came to me.

“Yeah, too bad,” said my mom.

I took the dishes to the kitchen and started to wash them. My mom remained in the dinning room, alone and in silence. I hated when she did that.

“Mom, this girl is very pretty!” I yelled from the kitchen, risking my tranquility for the rest of the night, but she didn’t answer.

I stopped washing the dishes. The doctor recommended she to take the sleeping pills when she felt sad. I went to her bedroom and took one of the pills to her.

“This will make you feel better, Mom.”

She just nodded and took her pill. This was a long time before Prozac and those pills only put her too sleep. Sometimes she felt better in the morning. I took her to bed and she lay there with her clothes on. I took off her shoes and covered her with a blanket.

“Sorry,” she said before sleeping.

“Sorry about what, Mom?”

“About being so sad!”

“It’s ok, Mom. You’ll feel better in the morning. Good night.”

I thought about painting the walls. They were already yellow, but their original intention was being white. The curtains were also old and needed to be

washed. I wanted to do that for her. Painting her room in a brilliant orange that made it impossible for her to get sad. I also wanted to buy new blinds and a new lamp. The view from her room was wonderful, but sometimes she didn't seem to care. I kissed her good night and then I turned off the light of her bedroom.

I went back to the living room and turned on the radio. I didn't know if I wanted to read some poetry or a novel. I became a very good reader thanks to Rafael. I don't exactly remember what they were playing on the radio. I wasn't actually listening, but just having it on as a soundtrack. Suddenly the Pepsodent commercial began. It was the same sound track of the TV commercial and I remembered the drugstore. I waited a little while. Our apartment had two bedrooms and one bathroom. I didn't want to be in the bathroom drawing the false tattoo and having my mother suddenly knocking at the door. The radio began to play *I Don't Know How To Love Him*. Most of the stations played music in English. The best Chilean musicians were exiled and Victor Jara was murdered by the Dictatorship. Musicians from other Spanish speaking countries were also singing revolutionary content and only some Chilean and Argentinean folk musicians were allowed. Their lyrics were so shallow and their music so lame that I preferred to listen to music in English, even though I didn't understand any English yet.

The song ended and I knew my mother was in the arms of chemistry. I turned off the radio, I entered in the bathroom and I locked the door. I felt like a little boy doing something wrong. When I put the eyeliners on the toilet tank; I felt like a clandestine transvestite. But I wasn't there to wear eyeliner on my eyes.

First I tested the different types of eyeliners on the back of my hand until I find the one most similar to Cristina's. After I identified the correct one, I proceeded to draw the mark on my arm. It was a simple design, so I didn't have much trouble copying my pin.

After I finished, I washed my hands, but the eyeliner test marks didn't erase. I had to use the small nailbrush to take the marks off from my skin. I liked that the pencils were good quality.

Cristina was pretty and she was my only goal. I am sure of it, though it was a confused era. After marking my skin, I went to the telephone and dialed her number.

Next day I was at the office of a man at the Department of State. The Department of Housing was the least important department of the Chilean Government and still is. This was *the* Department of State, the coolest department of the Nation. It was a huge grey building, with bronze doors that seemed taller than the same – all buildings in downtown Santiago were grey, glass buildings were still under construction. The lobby had marble or maybe imitation marble walls. The most amazing thing was the elevators were automatic and they actually worked. In the Department of Housing we had only one elevator that was working, it was in the main section of the building, and I never had to go there. The elevator in my part of the building was an old manual elevator that never worked, and when it did, it wasn't the most trust worthy machine in the world. Everybody used the stairs. The Great Master's office was on the sixth floor. I don't know why I remember this precise detail or why it caught my attention. I didn't know that 666 was the number of the devil, because I never actually read the whole Bible – Catholics are not as fond of the Book of Revelations as Protestants are. However, I remember the number glowing when I pressed the button. I was nervous. Even more nervous than the day before when I called Cristina.

"Hello, Osvaldo," she said on the phone. "If you want to talk to dad you need to take me to Coppelia on Saturday."

"Ok, I will," I said. Coppelia was one of the teahouses that had replaced the bars. I'd never been there before and I imagined it was very expensive and boring. Even though the prices were all right, the place was even more boring than I

imagined. That night she gave the phone to her father and he told me to meet him at 9:30 in his office. On the phone he was cold and made me nervous. The only thing he asked was my name.

The corridors were carpeted, spacious and they had even windows. I thought how I used to work in a mouse hole, and I was almost happy about losing that job. I entered in a large office and there was a receptionist who asked my name. She was a beautiful young girl. I thought that even in that aspect, our Secretary of Housing was poor: only old people worked there; only Emilia and I were young enough to date. I think we started our romance just because of that. As a matter of fact, we didn't have anything else in common.

"I will check," said the receptionist. She called her boss on the intercom and I heard him letting me in. She changed her expression as if I was someone important and her smile turned into a more nervous one. Now I think the man used to make people wait for him. I entered his office and he was standing in front of his desk.

"Please close the door," he said and I did. Then, despite his coldness by the phone and his obvious power, the man approached and hugged me. I didn't know what to do. "Dear brother!" he said. "You don't know how long have we been looking for you, for all of you!"

If I was intimidated before, now I was about to confess my charade. But fortunately the man almost didn't let me talk.

"You were working at the Department of Housing," said the man, "why didn't you go to the brotherhood when they fired you?" I wondered how he knew everything about me. He was obviously powerful and those were times when the

government knew everything about everyone, except the guys about they wanted to know about.

“I didn’t know what to do, sir,” I was almost confessing; I didn’t know what I was doing. My only time in Concepción were my first days in the Department of Hosing, when I was what they call a mouse’s head. If I was supposed to be a member of this society, I should have been invited while I was there. I instantly began to create a story about being invited later by a member who became a friend of mine. I didn’t make any friends in Concepción. The locals didn’t like the people from the capital city. My story was weaker than my position in the Department of Housing. If I were interrogated, I wouldn’t last a minute. Fortunately he never did and my fake story didn’t have to be told.

“So you are a true apprentice!” he said, “please call me Felipe; only in private, of course. My job doesn’t allow me to skip certain formalities. But we are the only people here.”

“Yes, sir,” I stupidly said, “I mean, yes Felipe.”

“I am your big brother, but your brother, Osvaldo.”

“Yes, Felipe.” My “Felipe” sounded just like “sir”.

“This Wednesday will be an initiation of some new members, Osvaldo,” said Felipe. “I hope to see you there. Give me your address.”

I wrote my name and my address on a piece of paper.

“Bad thing, Osvaldo,” said Felipe. “You need to have business cards. Where are you working now?”

“I work in a bookstore on San Diego Street,” I answered.

"You cannot work there!" he exclaimed. "You are a brother of the Astrum Aureum Society!"

"Yes, but after they fired me I couldn't find any decent job," I was excusing myself for some reason, "I worked even as a waiter and I was getting better money then."

"A waiter?" Felipe seemed to have nausea. "No brother of the Astrum Aureum could ever be working in such a subordinate position! I thought you were a customer in that bookstore."

I just shrugged. Felipe looked at me. His expression of nausea turned into an expression of guilt.

"I wonder how many brothers are in your position," he said.

"With all due respect, many brothers could be even in a worse position," I dared to reply. Many people were disappeared or simply dead. The implications of what I just said were pretty dangerous. I didn't even know the reach of the Dictatorship's crimes: they killed people almost until the end of the eighties.

Felipe looked through the window.

"The government has plenty of vacancies after we fired all those commies." It was as if I'd never made my last remark. "It won't be difficult to find a position for you. Something much better than your prior job. Something that also allows you to finish your education."

"Finish my education?" I asked. At the time I thought that my education was finished. I had a degree in accounting from Universidad Técnica.

"I think you want to make some progress in your life and not be a simple accountant," he replied. My aspiration was simply to work as an accountant and not as a waiter or a dependent; even though I enjoyed so much Rafael's company.

"Well I would like that," I lied, but then I realized that it wasn't a lie, "but we are living hard times."

"Not you anymore," smiled Felipe. "You are now back home. You are among your brothers and brothers care about each other."

"At what time will the meeting on Wednesday be?" I asked.

"You know that all the initiations are at midnight," he said and I didn't know. But the curfew was the perfect excuse for my ignorance. "Don't worry about the curfew. A car will pick you up to take you *Stonehenge*."

"Ok," I agreed. I didn't even know what the real *Stonehenge* was, but I didn't think it was wise to ask questions. Later I learned that this Lucien Goldstern founded The Astrum Aureum Society in the sixteenth century. However, they claimed an uninterrupted lineage of wisdom from the times of *Stonehenge*, that is from the times of King Arthur and not from the Neolithic. The idea of history of The Astrum Aurum Society was strictly mythical. The *secret* name for the main temples was *Stonehenge*. But I didn't know anything about this yet. I was a silly young guy who faked being part of a secret society just to date a girl, and then I was a part of this strange and powerful organization that could even overcome the banning of the right to assemble and the curfew. I decided to be quiet and wait. This was maybe the best decision I made in my whole life and it was pure instinct.

“Quit the bookstore,” said Felipe. “I will find a job for you in twenty days. Sorry for the delay, but you know that the public sector is slower than the private and I want you to finish your education. Only the government pays money for doing a little, even though they don’t pay too much.”

I just nodded.

“Please try not to eat too much at Coppelia on Saturday,” said Felipe. “You are invited to dinner in my house after that.”

“Thank you,” I said.

He approached me and shook one of my hands with his two.

“I am looking forward to seeing you this Wednesday,” he said. “Please remember to quit the bookstore. The good thing is that you have more than fifteen days for doing that.”⁶

I understood that I had to go. When I went out from his private office, his secretary stood up and gave me a nervous smile.

“Do you need something else, sir?” she asked.

“Thank you, I’m all right,” I said. Nobody had treated me as if I was important before and it felt good. Why deny it. Everyone in the world wants to feel important and I was no exception.

I went out of the building and began to walk to the bookstore. I was absolutely excited about having a new job and maybe finishing a new major. Master degrees and PhDs were not in use in Chile during the seventies. I think the graduate studies mania began in the eighties, but I cannot really tell because I wasn’t there

⁶ In Chile, the custom is quitting fifteen days before stop working, otherwise it is considered rude and it could cause a bad reference.

anymore. I thought about starting an economics major. The grey morning turned into a sunny and wonderful day and even the sad and afraid people of the city seemed to smile me.

I was kind of near my job and the bookstore didn't open until eleven. The meeting with Felipe was brief. Then, for the first time, I heard the voice of reason: I was not a member of the Astrum Aureum Society. I could be discovered at any moment when someone looked in some book with the name of the members. I didn't know yet that they didn't have any registry of members because they were a secret organization and they didn't want anybody to have any list of the brothers. The only ways the brothers had to recognize each other were certain secret word and the pin my mother innocently gave me. It was just a tradition and an anachronism. They were only powerful people and nobody would ever pursue them in any way or anywhere, except by mistake as it happened in Concepción. Their power was intact even during the Dictatorship and maybe it grew a little. As I learned later in the United States, democracy is an obstacle to secret societies. The regular conduct of government's institutions and that awful thing called Rule of Law made it more difficult for us to manipulate things. However it was never impossible, it never is. I would like to give some examples here, but revealing certain things wouldn't be wise. My family will survive me.

The construction of the Metro was noisy and I used to avoid walking near it. However, I walked three blocks beside it before changing my route. My own fear was noisier than the construction. I went to Forestal Park to think. Santiago was never a silent city, but the park was a little quieter. I wondered if I would be able to

continue with the charade. I never was a good actor before and this was the first fat lie in my life. It was actually the only one. The rest were just small falsehoods to cover this big one. My lie was first motivated only by the pheromones of a blonde, and then I was at the beginning of a new life. I thought about my mother, Rafael and even Cristina's sexy body. I decided I wanted her, but I didn't discover I was already in love. I also wanted to become an economist and live the life I couldn't dream of before. I wanted a big office, and a pretty brunette secretary like Felipe's. *Ignoti nulla cupido* our religion teacher in high school used to say: there is not desire for the unknown. She was a preconiliar, fascist, and prudish old woman. Maybe it is because of her that I've never been a religious or spiritual person. Of course she was talking about sex, as it is the Catholic obsession. That day I was in front of riches and power and all that could be mine. I decided to take it and to save the most I could and then run away to Argentina. Then I decided it would be better coming to America. I thought that here I would be far enough from Astrum Aureum Society if things went wrong. I didn't know the order was international, and the headquarters were in Washington DC. However, they never caught me and now they won't: I am a former Great Master, the top of the muffin, la crème de la crème. My escape plans never had to become a reality, at least not those escape plans.

But then I was still at the bottom of the bottom: I was underemployed because of political reasons, without a girlfriend, and without any savings. I wonder how I was happy. My life never seemed miserable to me before – except for the day when that Esteban beat me up in the Officers' Club. After leaving Felipe's office, I realized that there was another world, a parallel universe just by my side: the

universe of the privileged rich people. When I realized that, I believe I lost part of my fear. I don't know exactly why. I believe that it was because I partly realized that life had been unfair to me. I am convinced that my desire for Cristina helped in that process.

I started to walk to the bookstore. I was a little late, but Rafael wouldn't mind it. First I walked slowly because my meeting with Felipe had overwhelmed me. Then I walked faster than I used to because of the same reason. It felt like a dream. When I finally got to the bookstore, Rafael was just opening the locks. He was usually late; nobody went to buy books that early; most of the people went after lunchtime or after work.

"Good, you are late too," he said. He looked at me with his smile and I almost cried. Well, I actually did cry.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"Let's go inside, please," I answered.

He gave me a coffee from his big green thermos. We never drank alcohol in office hours. I looked somewhere and *The Man in the Iron Mask* looked back at me. For some reason I fixed my sight on the portrait of Descartes. His face was clearly and distinctively visible on the cover of the *Discourse on the Method*. Descartes was one of the few philosophers allowed in those years. The military thought he was inoffensive. For some reason Nietzsche's books were also available, maybe because the soldiers thought that he was pro dictatorships or something like that. Nobody read him properly anyway. Philosophy would be a taste acquired long after those days. Too bad I couldn't have authentic philosophical dialogues with Rafael. I wasn't

at his level and he could only be my teacher, as he was in a superb manner when he taught me how to read poetry. In that precise moment, I felt like shit for a reason I wasn't able to understand yet. It was a little after when I finally understood what happened to me: I felt guilty.

I have never known somebody more authentic than Rafael. Now I know that the authority of his sight was bigger than all Felipe's power and knowledge of the *secret arcana*. While I believed that the book covers were looking and condemning me, I told him everything, from the beginning to the end. I told him about Felipe, Cristina, and the Astrum Aureum. I told him about the eyeliners and the fake tattoo – I had it on my arm just in case I had to show it.

"Good Lord!" was his only answer and he was an agnostic. He kept quiet for a while and I was impatient for his verdict. A woman entered the store and I had to help her, even though she was one of Rafael's admirers.

When I was in elementary school, my mother forced me to do my First Communion and I had to confess to a priest. He asked me about if I liked to touch myself. I didn't understand what he wanted to say and he told me to pray something, the Our Father maybe. This time, however, I did feel guilty, but I didn't understand why. The woman was about to leave the store when Rafael came back from his introspection and began to talk to her.

"I am very sorry," he told her, "but this boy posed me a deep philosophical problem and I was considering that very seriously."

"And that's more important than me," said the woman and I knew that one of Rafael's flirting games was about to begin. I went outside as it was our pact and I

smoked a cigarette with the innocence of the seventies about the effects of nicotine – that innocence cost me my present condition. It was a sunny and pleasant day and the people were going fast wherever they were going. Men were dressed in suits of blue jackets and grey pants, and women walked incredibly fast on their high heels. I didn't know it yet, but I loved the dirty streets, the smog, and the used bookstores of San Diego Street. However, how indifferent about me was the world and how helpless I was! The woman went out of the store and I entered to listen to Rafael's verdict.

"Some years from now," he said, "the dictator will fall. I don't know if that will be in a few years from now or in decades, but I know it will happen. It always happens with tyrants. When that day comes, people could be free and they could work anywhere, despite their ideas."

"I hope so," I said.

"Before that time, you are losing the most critical period of your life working with me, because that's the only option you had until now," he continued. "You have this golden opportunity, but in order to take it, you have to lie."

"Yes, I have to," I said.

"Then do it," he said.

"What if they catch me?" I asked.

"Then you will be just where you are now," he said. "But if they don't, then you will be much better."

"But lying is not good," I said. "You are philosopher and you recommend a compromise with truth."

"I am not a philosopher, but just a philosophy professor, and the truth is that you cannot tell the truth all times, except in Philosophy or Science! Can you imagine what would happen if I say to that woman she looks ugly in her new dress? She would never buy a book again and I couldn't date her anymore."

"That's different," I laughed, "are you dating her?"

"No, but I' probably will," Rafael said seriously. To my knowledge he never dated her, but I cannot be sure. "However, don't change the subject" he continued. "Can you imagine if I tell the truth to the soldiers who were looking for my friends when they were hiding at home?"

"They would be murdered," I understood.

"Can you imagine what would happen if that Felipe finds out that you lied to him?" he finally asked.

"I cannot imagine," I felt as if I was in Plato's dialogue.

"I can," he said. "If you are now in a black list just because, then you will be in black lists for this... what's its name?"

"Astrum Aureum Society," I answered.

"Astrum Aureum Society," he repeated, "what a flamboyant name! Well, this *Golden Star* seems to be pretty powerful: there is no curfew for them, they can offer you a job, and a better education just like that; its Great Master works for the government, and he doesn't mind that you are on the black list. This is a transversal group. They are over politics and you have to go over politics to get a decent life! You have to do this!"

"What about their beliefs?" I asked. "Their alleged secrets."

“I don’t know anything about that,” he shrugged. “For me knowledge has to be for free and for everybody. I hate secrets. I was a professor of a public university where young people could go for a free education. This initiation knowledge is against everything I believe. But that’s a dangerous opinion nowadays, and too subtle for a guy in your position.”

I kept quiet and then a male client entered the store. He examined the books of the Philosophy section and asked if we had any of Marx’s books. We said we didn’t in a chorus and smiled. The guy didn’t seem like spy and spies were very notorious. This was a man in his fifties who was only a little bit distracted. His hair was badly combed and his whole aspect was messy. He changed to the poetry section. After a while he took a book of Gabriela Mistral and went to pay. He wore a grey suit and we couldn’t guess anything about him, except that he wasn’t a spy of the Dictatorship. He looked at me and smiled. Even though he had a general stupid expression, there was some light of intelligence in his eyes. He finally said goodbye and then went out. Rafael and I continued our already deep conversation.

“It’s impossible to avoid lying to other people, Osvaldo.” Rafael seemed pretty serious. “But it is unforgivable lying to oneself, at least about where one comes from. Please never forget who you are.”

I was so naïf that I didn’t understand what he was talking about, but soon I would.

On Wednesday a big black American car came to pick me up. I wore my best suit. A man opened the back door for me and I knew he was a chauffeur. He was a guy

in his forties, dark face, black hair and he called me “sir”. Cristina told me everything about Astrum Aureum before I went. We didn’t met before Saturday; we were still in the formal phase of courtship. Good girls were very formal at the time, even Cristina, who was absolutely avant-garde in her own way. Women didn’t want to be considered easy. However, after Bell’s invention, there was no protocol or decorum able to keep girls far from the phone. She called me every night to the consternation of my mother.

“Does that girl have nothing better to do than talking on the telephone?” asked my mother.

“I think she doesn’t,” I used to answer.

“In my times we didn’t call the boys every day,” she said. It must be the truth. Even in the seventies, it was very difficult to get a phone. It wasn’t a question of money, but there were long waiting lists and not any money in the world could buy a place there. As we lived in downtown Santiago, we were the lucky owners of a phone line. Downtown Santiago was the place where the Government was. Therefore, that part of the country had priority for some strategic services. When my mother was young, even fewer people had phones.

“She must be wasting a fortune!” continued my mother.

“She has money,” I answered.

“Anyway, it’s not considerate to call every night to a house at this hour,” said my mother. It was only eight o’clock at night. “Someone could call us for an emergency.”

That wasn't true. We didn't have any other family, nor any effective power to fix any kind of emergency. Though I never argued with my mother, I never did what she said. She apparently didn't notice that.

"Hello," Cristina used to say. "How is it that you never call me?"

"I just called you from the bookstore," I answered. I used Rafael's payphone outside his business. It worked with chips. I had to buy a metal chip and then put it in the phone. Rafael sold them. Chips replaced actual coins, because of the inflation during Allende's administration. The value of the money was so little, that the phone would be full with just three or four calls if people used coins.

"You never call me from home," she always said.

"It is because of my mother," I used to say, but it was also because our phone calls were so long and the price of the call was not as cheap as it is now.

"Don't you have another girlfriend?" she used to ask as a joke. I could hear her laughing on the other end of the phone.

"I don't have any girlfriend," I answered, "unless you want to be my girlfriend." My shyness began to disappear. That display of courage would have been impossible for me a few months before, like when I chased her into the bookstore for the first time. Maybe it was because of the charade at Felipe's office or the beating at the Officers' Club: a spoiled rich girl didn't seem too fearsome after those experiences. If I had been a little bit more experienced, I would have known that a woman could be more dangerous than all the dictatorships and secret societies of the world.

This conversation took place every night from the day I called her house to that Saturday. It was absolutely as childish as she was and I liked it. My teenage years were hard and masculine, and my mother's depression made me a premature adult. It wasn't as bad as having to work selling newspapers – something that only abandoned or very poor kids did in those times in Chile – but it was an austere period, without too expensive things, and having to worry about Mom. I think that's why Cristina's freshness amused me that much.

"I didn't make my mind up yet," she said, "maybe on Saturday."

Then I asked her about the brotherhood. I thought she wasn't a member, but she knew everything about it, even some of the secrets and the magic. Her story was that she knew about Astrum Aureum Society, because she found a document about it when she was fifteen, and then she became obsessed. Besides, in a flagrant violation of the rules of the order and in a rapture of tenderness of an indulgent father, Felipe told her everything about the rituals and secrets.

"There is a big round room," she told me. "The floor looks like a chess board. Lucien Goldstern also gave the idea to the Freemasons. He was also a Freemason Master, a Rosicrucian, and the Master for Rosencrantz himself. The chessboard floor represents the harmony that reigns in the universe."

"Harmony," I repeated. The recent history didn't tell too much about any harmony, but I didn't want to argue with her. I had to wait until I had access to the secret books to find who that Rosencrantz was. He was the mythical founder of the Rosicrucian order, and probably a fictional character like Goldstern. The Astrum

Aureum recognized relations with the Rosicrucian, but of course they thought their own society was better.

“Am I correct?” she asked.

“I cannot tell,” I answered. “I’ve never been to *Stonehenge* before.”

“You’re not being nice!” she told me.

“Lets do something,” I lied, “you tell me everything you know and I will tell you yes or not.”

With that innocent game I learned that the apprentices sat on the left, officials on the right and masters in the center⁷. All the brothers wore robes. Apprentices wore black robes; officials white and the masters wore black and white. They looked like Dominican monks. The Great Master, who was dressed in a red robe, hosted the meetings. Only in the central *Stonehenge* or the main chapter there was a Great Master and he ruled the society for the whole nation. Other chapters had a simple President Master and he dressed in purple. There were some other important officiants like one called the Great Vigilant, who was a master who had the duty of guarding the secrecy of the rite. He was also in charge of tattooing the arms of the new members. He sat at the left of the Great Master, and he represented severity. At the right of the master, there was another officiant called the Treasurer. He was an actual treasurer, but he also had to worry about the well being of the members. He represented indulgence. In the center of the chessboard floor, there was an altar with an open book. Cristina told me that it was the *Corpus Hermeticum* but it wasn’t. It was the Secret Book of the Astrum Aurum Society and nobody was

⁷ These details were a little bit altered to protect the sources. But they still can give a good picture of the meetings of the Astrum Aureum.

supposed to read it, until reaching the Master's status. I learned this by myself later and let her know after she became my actual girlfriend. However she already knew about this. She told me it was the *Corpus* because I was supposed to be only an apprentice. I wasn't even that.

When the big, black American car came to pick me up. I knew more or less what to do, where to sit and what to wear. The car went east. The eastside was the part of the city where rich people were moving. The interior light was on, as it was the protocol of the curfew. But we were not stopped by any military checkpoint or patrol. The trip was quiet until I heard some gunfire in the distance. I preferred not to think about that, and I rather wondered who was the owner of the car. Cars in Chile were mostly small French cars or some other European compact models. Fiat 600, Austin Mini, and Citroen 2CV were some of the most popular models. I think that checkpoints didn't stop us just because of the model of the car. Only rich people had American vehicles.

"Something bad is happening," said the driver after the gunfire.

"Bad indeed," I answered. I was too nervous with my own masquerade for being an altruist and think about other people. Poverty makes us selfish and so does wealth. That's why only the middle classes of the world are virtuous.

"The good thing is that my General will kill all those fucking commies," said the driver. Many poor people were grateful with the Dictatorship. The apparition of food almost the day after the coup made them think that Pinochet had worked some kind of miracle. They never thought that the owners of the big companies just hoarded the supplies to destabilize President Allende's socialist administration. The

General often appeared on TV giving houses to poor people – if they could be called houses. They say that even these days, in Chile there are some partisans of Pinochet of humble origins. I can understand it only because of the lousy education they are receiving.

“Yes, you are right,” I said in the car. It wasn’t healthy to contradict the official version.

“Excuse me, sir. May I ask you a question?” said the driver while he was already asking. That used to be so Chilean! In my experience, only Chileans ask if they can ask a question.

“Sure,” I said because of my lack of imagination. I wasn’t the best person to answer questions, but I didn’t think about any other answer.

“What kind of meetings are those you are going to?” he asked.

“Just an illegal casino,” I answered.

“It’s a secret, isn’t it?” he said.

“Like all illegal casinos.” Maybe it wasn’t a casino, but I was betting high. I said that because sometimes I watched *The Untouchables* on TV. American and already old series were the only programs to watch. I also watched the news, even though there was no purpose in that. They gave only the official version.

The car stopped and the driver went out. He didn’t open the door for me. Instead he went to another building. One of the brothers entered the car and he was surprised at finding me inside.

"I used to be the first one in this car," he spoke with the typical accent of the rich people of Santiago. "Nice to meet you. How is it that I've never seen you before?"

"I'm Osvaldo," I answered and offered my hand. "I was with the Concepción chapter."

"A guy from Concepción!" said the guy offering me his hand, "I'm José Patricio – please call me Pato – and I'm glad that the brothers from Concepción are finally back!"

"Are they all back? I lost contact with all of them," I lied.

"A coup is something too serious to leave it in the hand of those stupid soldiers!" said Pato. "But it was a total need."

The car stopped in some other place and the driver went to get another brother. He entered the car and he was equally surprised at my presence.

"There is a new bird in the cage," he said, "nice to meet you, I'm Miguel."

I presented myself again and I stuck to my story.

"This bloody Dictatorship of killers," said Miguel. "They arrested the members of Concepción Chapter and now they are missing!" I began to understand that there were many missing brothers, maybe the whole chapter of Concepción.

"Excuse me," said Pato, "this is not a dictatorship, but just an extraordinary government because of the Commies, Commies like you!"

"If that's true," said Miguel, "how is it that there are lost brothers in Concepción and how is it that they killed Victor Jara? Was he dangerous? He was just a singer!"

“Someone made a mistake,” said Pato.

Miguel was sitting on the front seat and was looking back by the mirror. Then he turned back.

“You are just a fascist,” said Miguel.

“And you a fucking Communist,” said Pato.

“I’m not a Communist, but a Social Democrat,” corrected Miguel.

“It’s just the same,” said Pato.

“You know it is not!” corrected Miguel.

I thought they were about to start a fistfight, but then the most amazing thing happened. They shook hands and they looked at me. I guessed that they wanted my hand in the same handshake.

“But we are brothers, and our brotherhood is bigger than our differences,” they both said in a chorus.

We arrived at a green house in Las Condes. Las Condes was mostly a neighborhood under construction. The biggest part of the upper class had not moved there yet, but Providencia was still the fashionable part of the city. This was a big house, but not really elegant, and it seemed to be more for some commercial use. It was a house of two floors and it was maybe thirty or twenty years old. It was probably an investment of some visionary man who knew where the city was growing to. A small sign had the inscription *Golden Star Foundation*. But we didn’t enter the house. The chauffer entered and the brothers and I kept walking to the backyard. There was a two-floor building with glass doors and a metal structure. It was a mix of bronze, black iron, and glass. Even though it wasn’t an impressive big

structure, that kind of architecture was absolutely revolutionary for a country without skyscrapers. The fact that that building was in the backyard of an old house was even more bizarre. People built that kind of building to show off, not to hide behind old houses.

The lobby was austere and impersonal. It was just a room with dark walls and without any decoration. The light came from some holes in the ceiling, as it is very common today, but then that was also the seal of a brand new building. Everybody was silent. At the right there was a small room where they had the robes for the brothers. I was supposed to be a simple apprentice, so I took a black robe as Cristina told me. She was correctly informed. Nobody talked and neither did I. We entered to *Stonehenge*, or the principal room. It was a circular room also disposed as Cristina said. The decorations of the walls imitated the cromlechs of the original structure, but these were not in ruins. In the center there was the book opened on a square stone and over it there was a human skull. Cristina didn't tell me about the skull. I decided to tell her on Saturday in exchange for more information. I didn't know she would barely let me talk. We all sat where we were supposed to sit. Felipe entered with his red robe and the two other officiants also came with him. Everybody stood up.

"Thelema," said Felipe and put his right fist on his heart.

"Thelema," said the crowd imitating the gesture.

"We are one in all and all in one. We are in the magic light of the Astrum Aureum," said the Great Master and everybody repeated the formula. "The most southern *Stonehenge* ever built is awake," he ended. I didn't understand a word

because he was speaking Latin. I founded a small pamphlet with the text in Latin and Spanish and that's how I knew what he was saying. Some time after I learned that they used Latin to keep their secrets out of the reach of ignorant and illiterate people. Latin was the language of universities until the ninth century. In the seventies, however, none of us spoke Latin and the society didn't offer Latin classes for the initiated. I took a class later in the United States, but I forgot everything I learned after a while. Now I think the use of Latin was the most ridiculous part of the Astrum Aureum's rituals. I wanted to get rid of Latin when I was the Great Master, but the brothers liked it too much. I looked like *Harry Potter* wearing a black robe and saying spells in Latin. Fortunately, neither the book nor the movie existed then. I would have a laugh attack. Without having seen the movie, I felt serious and part of something very important and sacred. For a while, I even forgot that I was an impostor and a profane.

"Amen," answered the whole crowd.

Seven masters came down from their place and they opened seven false doors on the floor. That surprised me. Seven holes were discovered and inside each one was a man without a shirt, wearing handcuffs, and his eyes covered by a black mask. The seven masters helped them to come out of the niches and then they close the doors, and the chessboard floor looked intact again. Every master took out one of the men in handcuffs. Then every one of them stood in front of one of the men, and pointed a dagger at their neck. The Great Vigilant spoke:

"Do you swear on your life not to reveal anything of what you may see here in *Stonehenge*?" asked the Great Vigilant. Even though I am lousy with faces, I

thought his was familiar. Of course I had never made that oath. It was also in Latin, of course.

"Iuramus!" or "Yes we do swear!" was the answer of the men.

The masters put down the daggers and retired.

"Welcome to the light of the chosen ones!" said Felipe also in Latin. "The light of Thelema, the light of our golden star!"

Everybody stood up and in applauded. The seven masters came back with some master robes and every recently initiated men received one. They came to us and they gave us the robes. We took out off own robes and we gave them to the neophytes. Everybody applauded again. I was doing just what everybody was doing and I didn't know what was this whole thing about. There were also seven apprentices in the apprentices place. They sat where we were and I followed the other apprentices, without the robes. We delivered the robes to the officials of the first line, and they gave us their white robes. I was an official already and it was my first day in the Astrum Aureum Society. I thought that it was really easy to get a promotion. Later I learned that the stage of apprentice lasted a year, and only seven men were initiated every year in every chapter of the country. The new candidates replaced the apprentices who also replaced seven officials. One had to be an official for two years before becoming a master or an adept: a full member of the Astrum Aureum.

I put on my new white robe and sat in my new spot: the second line of the officials' site. The rest of the officials switched to the first line. They would be adepts the next year. The whole movement created a total mess, but after the ceremony

ended, every one was sitting in his place and Felipe started to give the secret teachings:

“Tonight is a great night.” He was speaking Spanish; Latin was only for the rituals. “We are awake while the rest of the world is asleep. The Astrum Aureum Society started to reunite at night because there were interesting times. Nobody wants to live in interesting times. When we read history, we never read about the emperor Valente, but we read about Cesar, because he conquered the Gaul. Interesting times are turbulent times and nobody wants to live in turbulent times. Fortunately times have changed,” he said.

I remembered the gunfire I heard from the car and I thought that we were also living in very interesting times.

“We still meet at night,” he continued, “because we want to symbolize that we are awake and we need to wake up while everybody else is sleeping. We are the ones that can wake up. We are the ones with a mission. Our mission is not only sacred, but it is also mundane. We are not a monastic order, but a group of men who live in the world and who walk with open eyes to the future.”

Somebody coughed. Felipe looked at everybody with a mix of paternal concern and deep wisdom. After this dramatic pause, he continued:

“I know that many of you think that the Astrum Aureum Society should do something in the present time. But we are doing something; we are preserving our society to accomplish its mission. Every one of you is free to act in politics as his wish and the Astrum Aureum Society will be there to protect you. But the

brotherhood has to remain neutral and unknown to the profane world. They would not understand our mission.”

Felipe then taught us some tools that we had to pursue the mission of the Astrum Aurum Society. First of all, after being admitted in the society, none of us was anymore a simple mortal, but a chosen one. As a chosen one, a brother had the power to ask from Thelema any kind of favor. Later I had a hard time understanding what this Thelema was about. I was not supposed to know yet that this Thelema was the true name of God. However, it wasn't actually a god, but some kind of pantheistic energy living in all things, something like the Force in Star Wars. When I finally saw that movie, I wondered if Lucas had something to do with the society. As the Great Master, I realized he was never related to the Astrum Aureum. In the order, the line between the good and the dark side of the force was thin, if it ever existed. I followed the saga because the similarities with our doctrine were amazing. However, the brothers of the Astrum Aureum were more like the *Siths* than the *Jedis*. I guess that made me the *Imperator* or at least *Darth Vader*. As a matter of fact, I had been in both positions. We were allowed to perform certain rituals using some instruments like a dagger and the pin with the symbol of the society – that happened to be a powerful amulet; this was true in my case.

Asking favors from Thelema in front of a mirror turned out to be a really good way to connect to it. And of course we had to go the meetings in the temple or in *Stonehenge*, as the places of meeting were named. I learned there were several *Stonehenges* in several cities and countries, including the one in the United States, which was the most important of them.

Later and helped by Rafael, I found that the word 'Thelema' was the Greek for 'will'. The word was employed to describe a doctrine created by Rabelais that said that a man had to do his own will and that should be his only law. The notorious magician Aleister Crowley also was a follower of the Rabelais doctrine. However, the Astrum Aureum Society didn't recognize any connection to the guy that referred to himself as *The Great Beast*.

That night I listened to the words of the Great Master and I liked them. I liked the fact that I was special. I thought that the pin of the Astrum Aureum came to me because of this Thelema thing and that I was a full member. We had to say the name Thelema every morning, because this word itself was magical and full of power, but we were not supposed to say it in front of any profane.

"These tools could look simple, but they are powerful and you have to use them well," finished Felipe.

"With a great power comes great responsibility," I thought. I used to read *Spiderman* not many years before. I probably believed I was in a comic book and I was about to become a super hero. Young people are prone to believe those things. Life suddenly had a purpose of cosmic importance and I was a main actor in the eternal drama. Those days seem like another life from my present perspective. Now I am certain that I am as irrelevant as everybody else in the universal chaos. I had to learn this in the difficult way: by my own experience and not by any book. Dying doesn't look that terrible now and it certainly will be a relief.

"*Stonehenge* goes back to silence, but it never sleeps," said Felipe in Latin at the end. "We are one in all and all in one. We are in the magic light of the Astrum Aureum. The most southern *Stonehenge* that remains will never die."

"Thelema," said the whole crowd.

"Amen," said the Great Master and the works of that night were finished.

There was a banquet every night on the second floor. After a few months in the Astrum Aureum, I gained several pounds.

I didn't know any of the new apprentices and I was an official now. I was there sipping my wine in a corner and trying to gather the most information possible. Then the vigilant came to me. His name was Jorge.

"I remember you, dear brother," he said.

I was afraid, but I miraculously recognized the man I saw in the bookstore asking about books of Marx. It was a miracle that I was able to remember a face, I told him.

"Don't you remember me from Concepción?" he asked me.

"I am very sorry, but I don't," I answered. I didn't want to tell a lie that I couldn't support. I was learning very fast how to mix truths and lies. Even I was amazed at my talent for lying. I became able to write a complete theory of lying. The first rule is that a good lie had to imitate the truth. People who tell the truth don't remember every detail and they don't feel the need to tell everything. Not remembering everything is not only all right, but it also avoids suspicions.

“But I remember you,” he said to my surprise; I didn’t argue. “You were one of the last initiated and for some reason you didn’t go that night. Many of our members stayed at home because of the events.”

“I thought it was dangerous to go out that night.” How fast I became a master of lying!

One has to make the other person believe that he or she knows more than one knows. In that way they would be giving details to improve the quality of one’s story. Repeating, “Yes, it’s true,” or “You are right,” are good ways to do this.

“Some people thought that you were lacking faith,” said *my dear brother*, “but you were right. Thelema is not like the God of the Christians. Thelema is a power for those who are brave, but also wise. You, my friend, were wiser than we were.”

I nodded and I tried not to blow my cover. The vigilant, the man in charge of keeping the secrets away from profanes, believed he knew me. His glasses were amazingly thick and his memory surely was even worse than his sight. I knew that this man would be my best source of information about what happened in Concepción, and therefore I asked him for the details.

“That night will be remembered as a dark night by the Astrum Aureum Society,” he began. “The navy banned all meetings, but of course we believed that that was not about our meetings. We went to our temple at nine, as is the usual time for the ordinary rites. We were a few and then the marines came into the temple in the most outrageous sacrilege!”

Jorge was upset while he was telling his story. He took out a pack of cigarettes and took one before offering one to me. In the times of tobacco innocence,

the protocol was to offer a cigarette to the other person first. I took my cigarette. Smoking was a bad decision, but when I finally knew that, I wasn't able to quit.

"Many of the brothers were indeed involved in some subversive actions," he continued. The word "subversive" implied everything from distributing illegal pamphlets – all political pamphlets were illegal – to integrating the cells of armed resistance. "Tirso Gavilán was one of the most important men of the Socialist Party of Concepción and the order couldn't do anything about his disappearing. I cannot imagine how you feel after losing your godfather."

The godfather was the master who presented the neophyte to the order. I never met this Gavilán fellow, but he was conveniently missing and they would never find him. I always wondered what happened to his real godson. I guess he was also a member of some leftist party and he was probably killed. I was in the place of a dead man. I was taking advantage of the bad memory of the nearly blind vigilant and of the absence of proper records. That's the kind of person I am: the kind of person that lives and prevails. That is what life taught me to do. I don't feel any guilt about my actions in this sense. Nevertheless, when I became the Great Master, I established a digital record of all members in the world. Nobody could sneak into the brotherhood anymore. It was not my idea, and it would not look good if I denied doing it.

One of the apprentices came to talk with us.

"Hello, sir," he said to Jorge.

"Don't sir me anymore! You are now my brother," said Jorge. He touched the apprentice's arm.

“Ouch!” said the apprentice.

“The tattoo is still fresh,” said Jorge. “I did it just yesterday as the rite commands.”

I touched my arm. I forgot drawing the fake tattoo.

“You still remember the pain from the time I tattooed yours,” said Jorge.

“How could I forget?” I said this with an impressive nerve. Lying is like riding a bicycle: once you learn how to do it, you are an expert.

Apparently the events of Concepción were very traumatic for Jorge, because he told the whole story again to the apprentice. I stayed there to learn it again. That night I barely touched the food.

The banquet was a buffet. I learned that in the first times the brothers used to eat on a round table, but after the years they used the modern buffet as a way to avoid the presences of waiters – as I was not much longer before – among the brothers. I was hungry, but that night I didn’t eat too much because I spent most of the time with Jorge to learn the most I could about the chapter of Concepción and build a better story. I never needed that story, because nobody ever asked me anything. However I could blow the whole charade making the wrong comment. The final rule is that the best way of lying is keeping quiet and nodding.

Felipe went to talk to us with a glass of wine for me. He gave me the glass and I drank it. My original glass was already empty.

“I see you find our vigilant,” said Felipe.

“Yes, he was from Concepción,” I said.

“No, I wasn’t, dear brother. I went there only to tattoo the neophytes,” corrected Jorge. “I already was the vigilant of *Stonehenge*, here in Santiago.”

“Dear brother Jorge,” laughed Felipe, “this guy is a fake! We just promoted the wrong man!”

I thought I would faint. I felt small and I waited for what I thought it was the second beating of my life.

“Impossible,” said Jorge, “I remember him and Tirso Gavilán, his godfather! However, I don’t remember his name.”

“His name is Osvaldo,” said Felipe, “and he doesn’t deserve his position in *Stonehenge*!”

The brothers made silence and looked at us. I wasn’t hungry anymore.

“How is it that you became an official without studying the teachings that every apprentice have to learn!” he finally said and I was relieved.

He gave me the *Manual of the Apprentice* and the *Manual of the Official* and he made me promise to perform the rituals of the manual of the apprentice book from next morning to the end of my life. I promised to study everything in a record time. Felipe told me that he would conduct a special examination for me. Besides this small bureaucratic procedure, I was already in and nobody questioned my legitimacy as a brother of the order ever again.

I didn’t know it yet, but the examination never took place, and when I had to take my place as an adept of the Astrum Aureum Society, I did it brilliantly: I changed my robe like a professional.

The next day I wasn't sleepy, even though I had the rare privilege of being out late. My mom used to wake up earlier because she had to be at the school at eight. That night, however, I didn't sleep too much. Therefore I decided to surprise my mom with a perfect breakfast. When she woke up and saw the table was set, she almost cried. My poor mother was like that since I could remember. One had to tolerate some tears with her. But this time, though she was emotional, she didn't cry.

"You didn't have to," she said.

"It's not a problem," I answered. "Besides, I will have a new job soon and I will not have time to spoil you anymore."

"Where will you work?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I only know that I will work for the government again."

I poured her some tea and gave her some egg and toast. I ate the same. Coffee was still considered a fancy drink. Those were simple times. Telling my mother that I would work for the government was like telling nothing. The government was still the biggest employer of the country and Chile was not the avant-garde of the neo-capitalist model yet.

"I didn't heard you arrive yesterday, Osvaldo," said mom wearing her mother role and controlling me.

"I was in a meeting of a club as I told you, mom," I answered. That was a standard answer that I learned from Cristina. The brothers called the Astrum Aureum Society 'the club'.

"What kind of club meets at night despite the curfew?" she fairly asked.

“A very important and powerful one,” I said. “So powerful that it is even over the curfew.”

“Are you in one of those resistance groups?” she looked into my eyes.

“If I was a decent man, I should be in one of those,” I also looked into her eyes, “but I am not.” This was the most sincere thing I ever said in my life. I have not changed this opinion.

“Thank God!” said my mother. “But how is it that you cannot tell me more about this club!”

“It is a gentlemen’s club composed of very powerful men, mom.”

She finished her breakfast in silence and she finally asked:

“Are you a Freemason now?”

For someone like my mother, being a Freemason was being a worshiper of the Devil. Freemasonry was like the progressive club of the time and many politicians and presidents belonged to it. They created the civil marriage; allowing people to marry before a civil official and not before a Catholic priest. That was the only alternative before. They also were authors of the separation of the church and the government. Catholic propaganda – made from the pulpits – presented them as impious sinners and Catholics devoted like my mother bought that preaching.

“No, Mom, I am not a Freemason.”

“You should go to the church with me this Sunday, my son,” she begged.

“I will, Mom,” I lied.

“You always say the same but you never go,” she guessed.

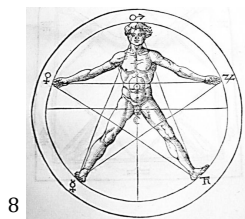
“I will go this time,” I lied again. She paid me a look of wise skepticism.

She finally had to go and I remained alone. It was the last week of school before winter vacations. As I didn't have any other decent mirror, I had to use the mirror of the bathroom to perform my first personal ritual of the Astrum Aureum Society.

"The Golden Star is the symbol for the will, for Thelema," said the book. "The first step for the Astrum Aureum brother is to develop his will. This is a practice that the brother should perform until the end of his life."

I had to stand in the position of the man that appears in the Agrippa Pentacle⁸ and trace the star on my forehead with a golden fire. This was using my imagination, of course. Then I had to imagine a line of fire creating the star as is shown in the picture and finally I had to trace the pentacle of the devil⁹ on my heart. This was also accompanied by a complicated series of inhalations and exhalations.

"My will is beyond good and evil!" I exclaimed, following the instructions of the manual. At home we were allowed to say the ritual in Spanish, unless we thought that someone was listening. If that were the case, Latin would make them



Agrippa Pentacle.



Devil's Pentacle. From the book *The Clue of Black Magic* by Stanislas de Waite.

believe that it was a Catholic prayer. That rule was written when Catholics used to pray in Latin, but they stopped that in 1962. Nevertheless, the brothers still believed that Latin was a good cover. They even believe that now, but not because they want to pass as Catholics, but because they think that there is some kind of magic in the words. They think that Lucien Goldstern himself wrote the words in Latin. After visualizing the pentacles, I had to visualize the emblem of the Astrum Aureum Society on the mirror. I wasn't a man with a particular talent for visual imagination, therefore doing this was hard the first time and it took me a while. However, the whole images finally were fixed in my head. "Thelema," I exclaimed. "We are one in all and all in one; in the magic light of the Astrum Aureum Society. The light nurtured by thousands of adepts through generations." After these words, I had to imagine a fire covering all my body and giving me power beyond good and evil. "My will is my only law, my will is Thelema!" I exclaimed. I remained standing there in the bathroom, in front of the mirror, and surrounded by all these imaginary lights. I felt full of power and wisdom. "I am awake, and I will be awake for all eternity! Amen," with these words my first morning ritual of the Astrum Aureum Society was completed, and I felt like another man. Imagination was powerful indeed; it made me believe that I was better than everybody else and that wasn't true.

It was still early and I continued reading the *Manual of the Apprentice* searching for more wisdom. The ritual performed in the bathroom left me with a strange but pleasant sensation. My whole body was tingling and I saw spermatozoids of light where ever I looked. Now I know that those light spermatozoids are a very common optical illusion called photopsia. The form of the

lights can vary in different cases. In this case, fixing the sight in the mirror, the visualizations, and the complicated set of inhalations and exhalations produced the phenomenon. The book described this effect as a sign of a ritual well performed: the light was supposed to be the true energy of the Universe and Thelema itself.

The manual also described different variations of the ritual for some specific purposes like healing from illness, prosperity or to conquer a woman. In the second part, the book described how to kill an enemy using the power of Thelema and how to be protected from what was called a psychic attack. After every chapter, the book repeated the formula,

“Silence is as precious as gold and as strong as steel. If these powerful rites are known by profanes, they will certainly lose their power. You shall never reveal any sacred word, or any sacred rite to those uninitiated in the Astrum Aureum Society. If you perform a ritual with certain purpose, you shall not reveal what you are doing even to the brothers, unless it is a ritual performed by a group. In that case, only the members of that precise group shall know what they are doing, *don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.*”

The book had about two hundred pages, but it had many illustrations. I finished it in less than three hours and the reading trapped me. I'd never read a book like that before and I still had to read *The Manual of the Official*, which promised even deeper secrets.

It came the time to go to the bookstore so I put the manuals on the bookshelf of my bedroom. Both books were black hard cover books and their pages had a

golden trim; they had not any inscription on the covers or the spine and they looked like bibles. I didn't want my mother nosing in those books because she could die from the fear. I put the books in a carefully anonymous place before leaving the house and going to the streets.

As I walked I looked at the faces of the people. It was a sunny day and the unexpressive faces walked in all directions. A few years before, people were possessed by the idea of a revolution or by the fear for it. That day people were just walking indifferent to each other's life and mostly ignorant about the killings, like I still was, even after Esteban beat me up. I think that at that moment I even forgot about the gunfire of the night before. I felt empowered by a new mysterious energy and in possession of a hidden wisdom.

I arrived at the bookstore and found Rafael kneeling opening the locks.

"Hello," he said, and then, as if he were reading my mind, he threw me a sentence that I will never forget, "*there are also gods here.*"

As he realized that I was wearing a questioning face, he explained himself:

"It's a quote from Heraclitus. It was told that one day some young disciples went to find Heraclitus to receive his teachings. They found him boiling water, and they didn't know what to do in front of the great philosopher's humble behavior. *There are also gods here*, he said after he saw the perplexity of the young men."

"That's a good story," I replied, but I didn't know how to extract the wisdom of it.

“It is one of his fragments. All we have from Heraclitus are some disconnected fragments. But you have news! Did they discover that you are an impostor?”

After my morning exercises, I didn’t feel like an impostor anymore. Part of the scarce doctrine contained in the *Manual of the Apprentice* said that everything in the world happened for a reason. Therefore, I believed that if I was in the Astrum Aureum Society, it was because it was the right place to me.

“No, they didn’t,” was my only answer. I was a different guy from the one who went to Rafael crying because he didn’t want to lie. Fortunately Rafael didn’t notice or deliberately ignored my stupidity. I was still young and being stupid was still my privilege.

Of course Rafael was curious about the society. He asked me about the rituals, the temple, the people, and the curfew. I tried to answer his questions, but I didn’t want to betray the secrets of my own rituals and the things that I learned in the *Manual of the Apprentice*. The words “*don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing*” sounded to me like an eternal truth, even though it was commonly repeated in my Sunday school when I was a kid. That day, I felt as if I was in possession of the secret arcana that let me understand the true secret meaning of the scriptures. I barely had read the scriptures. However, I was in debt to Rafael, so I decided to give him some pieces of the story.

“The candidates were in tombs to symbolize the resurrection!” said Rafael when I told him about the initiation.

“I guess,” I answered. I actually didn’t know about the meaning of it.

"It is a very repeated symbol," said Rafael. "The idea is to transcend death and live in some kind of eternity. All religions are about the same thing."

"This is not a religion," I replied. The introduction of the apprentice manual was very clear about this particular. The Astrum Aureum was not a religion, but an organization of keepers of the ancient mysteries. Those mysteries were not supposed to be mere beliefs. They were occult truths beyond Science, Philosophy and general human knowledge. Of course I bought all that as the ultimate truth.

"It is a religion," replied Rafael. "Maybe it's not a church and maybe they have no clergy. But they are members of a religion in the primal sense of the word 'religion' '*re ligare*', re-unite. They are gathering for a common objective and that objective is to gather with some transcendent ideal."

I didn't understand too much of what Rafael was telling me. Despite the ceremonies at *Stonehenge*, Latin was totally unknown to me, and these were my first spiritual and truly intellectual experiences. The only man who actually spoke Latin I ever met in Chile was Rafael. He learned it at the Philosophy School. For me, something like the etymology of a word was not quite enlightening.

"What do they think about what's happening?" he asked. I had to think about his question and I almost asked him what he was talking about. Fortunately I got that he was talking about the Dictatorship.

"It is a transversal organization," I answered with conviction and I referred the argument in the car.

"So they support Pinochet," he said.

“No, they don’t,” I answered. “They think that there are things more important than politics.”

I told him about what happened in Concepción and the story about my alleged godfather, Tirso Gavilán.

“So now they have a leader who is highly ranked in the Pinochet administration,” continued Rafael, “and they have their privileges with the condition of *looking the other way*. Well, people do what they have to do in order to survive. Dead heroes are useless, I guess. However...”

“However?” I asked.

“However, who am I to judge other people? I am so heroic being the owner of a used bookstore!”

I admit that this thought annoyed me a little. Suddenly, all Rafael’s curiosity was dissipated and he just changed the subject.

“I’m going to miss you when you are gone,” he said. “But you also have to do what you have to.”

I felt compassion for Rafael. In my own naivety, his former huge moral stature became for me the innocence of a child. I wanted to teach him my new secrets and the powers I discovered. Nevertheless, I thought that if he wasn’t already in possession of those secrets, it was because of a reason, an occult one, of course. There I was, in front of a man who taught Philosophy for decades, who wrote books, and I felt superior after reading one lonely book of occult powers – I didn’t know about the books he wrote until much later, after someone quoted one of them in an seminar of Philosophy I was forced to take in the United States. I was already

working and they wanted me to be more aware about leftist tendencies in Latin America. The instructor let me Xerox it. It was an old book and impossible to find anymore. He learned Spanish in a semester abroad, and some professor recommended him that book in Venezuela. Rafael was ill already and he died not much time after. I could rescue his books from oblivion and even get them translated. I just didn't have the imagination. His book was complex; it was about Heidegger, Hegel, and their relation to Marx in Latin American policies. I didn't understand a line and the title was too complex to remember. He also wrote a poetry book that I never found. Fortunately, that day I didn't tell him what I thought. He would think that I was an imbecile and he didn't like imbeciles. Our friendship would be lost forever. It is a good thing that silence can replace intelligence; it is even better most of the times.

On Saturday it was the moment of truth. I went to that fancy café and she was there half an hour fashionably late; that used to be the proper thing to do for classy girls on their first date. She looked gorgeous. I'd never been with a girl like her before. My former girlfriends were all right and reasonably pretty. However, Cristina's body and face were comparable only with those of models and Hollywood actresses; her green eyes were her prettiest attribute. I've never seen eyes like hers again.

When she entered into Coppelia Café, she attracted instantly the looks of all men and even all women. Many people said hello from their tables and she took like a whole minute before sitting in the table where I was; two girls intercepted her to

whisper about me. I know it was about me, because they were staring at me and while they were talking, one of them even pointed at me with her finger. Later I learned that the girl who pointed me was Josefa. Cristina finally arrived to the table and presented her cheek for the ritual kiss.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said, but she wasn’t sorry: her delay was as strictly adjusted to the protocol as her excuse.

“Please don’t worry,” I answered, also adjusting to the protocol. “I was just craving your presence for a while.” The last part was totally out of protocol, but she seemed to like it.

“Are you a poet?” she smiled.

“Just a poetry reader and the author of some monstrosities that belong to the trash can.”

“You should show me what you write,” she demanded.

“My writing is already where it belongs,” I firmly said, “I deserve the Nobel Prize because I saved humanity from that horrible threat that was my poetry.”

The truth is that I never wrote poetry in my life, but I did write those barely witty lines. They seemed to work.

“Cristina!” said a man from the entrance of the café.

“That fucking bastard,” she said smiling and without moving her lips. She could have been a ventriloquist.

The man came and kissed her on her cheek.

“Hello, Pablo,” she said with the coldest smile I’ve ever seen before. After that I have seen many colder smiles in my life.

Pablo looked at me from the top to the bottom.

"Hello," I said and presented my hand. I received the weakest handshake of my life.

"Who are you?" he asked using a tone that I never heard again in any other person who was not from Chile. Only the Chilean upper class was able to produce that tone. It is a mix of shallowness, stupidity, superiority, and some other special qualities. They sound as if they were talking with a hot potato in their mouth. Chileans refer to that tone as *speaking with the potato*.

"I'm Osvaldo," I firmly answered, "nice to meet you."

"I don't know you," he *spoke with the potato*.

"And do you happen to know all people?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "I happen to know everybody who is *someone*."

"Well," I replied, "you don't know me."

"I've noticed that," he ironically said, "where did you go to high school?"

"I went to the Instituto Nacional."

The Instituto Nacional was once the first public school of the nation and it was full of excellence, tradition, and pride. However, that was barely good enough for the upper classes. They used to send their kids to expensive Catholic schools and I think they still do it. They didn't want their children to mix with some outcast or with people like me. I wasn't a complete outcast because my father was a judge. Remaining at Instituto Nacional and Downtown Santiago made me a not *roto*, but a

*mediopelo*¹⁰. Mediopelos were acceptable if they did not pronounce the 'ch' as 'sh' – the ultimate mark of the *roto* – and if they were not intimidated by guys like this Pablo. I had already confronted the DINA, so someone like this Pablo was just annoying. My diction in Spanish was also correct for the Chilean social linguistics.

"Oh my God," said Pablo. "You were in that den of Commies!"

"Not everybody was a Communist there. As a matter of fact, they were a minority," I replied.

"One Commie is a Communist too many." Pablo's face showed nausea. "Those fucking bastards wanted to expropriate our family's lands. We were about to defend ourselves with guns. Thank God, our General came and everything is as it had to be again."

"Sure," I said. It wasn't wise to dissent from the official version in a public place.

"Well, nice to meet you," Pablo finally smiled. "See you around, *Cristi*."

The waiter came to our table only after Pablo was gone. Fortunately he never sat with us as I thought he would.

"Hello, my name is Alejandro," he said. Only in fancy places do the waiters present themselves and this was my first time in a fancy place. "May I take your order please?"

"I want an ice coffee," said Cristina. She didn't say please.

¹⁰ *Roto* is a person of the lowest class in Chile. A *mediopelo* is someone of the middle class who is coming up from the lower classes or who is impoverished but from the upper class, as Osvaldo was.

"I want a cappuccino and a cheese sandwich, please, Alejandro," I said. I was a waiter no long time ago. He went to the kitchen and we were at last alone.

"This place was a bad idea," she said, "but it is near home and I don't have a car. Dad wants to buy me one, but I hate driving and I will not use a chauffer, that would be snob."

"Certainly," I replied. This woman lived in a totally different world from mine and I was little bit intimidated. However, I was already different from the guy that worked at the Department of Housing.

"Bad idea you had in meeting here," she said.

"But it was your idea!" I exclaimed.

"And you are such a villain to let a lady take the responsibility for her bad decisions?" she asked me with the most sexy baby face of the world.

"Sorry, it was my fault," I followed her game.

"You have some possibilities of becoming my boyfriend," sentenced Cristina.

"I'm looking forward to that position." My nerve was amazingly increasing. It was true that what didn't kill one made one stronger. I was afraid, but I had a strength that was stronger than my fear. It wasn't like it is now, that I am almost fearless. I am fearless not because I am brave, but because there is nothing to fear anymore: my life is already lived. In those days everything was different. I had a future, a world of possibilities, and I was in love. I had nothing clear in my mind then, but I am glad I didn't let Cristina pass away. I could never forgive myself if I did.

That could be the most romantic moment of my life. But that Pablo came back to say goodbye and he talked stupidities for an eternity before finally going away.

“What an annoying guy!” Cristina smiled and used her amazing ventriloquist’s abilities.

“Excuse me, but who is that Pablo guy, Cristina?”

Alejandro brought our order and I thanked him. Cristina kept talking as if he wasn’t there.

“Pablo Norambuena Larraín is just a guy I know,” she said boringly, “his father was a partner of my father in some kind of business they had once.”

“Business? What kind of business was he in?”

“My father has many businesses, how could I know?”

“I thought he was just a public official.”

“Dad? That’s his apostolic mission for saving the fatherland from poverty and Communism, and for taking it to development. You know that’s not the way to make money in this country, or anywhere.”

“My dad is dead, but he was a judge and my mom...” I couldn’t finish my sentence.

“I know, Dad told me everything about you,” smiled Cristina and I felt a little bit more intimidated. “The only think I don’t like about you, is that my father likes you too.”

“Too bad being so charming,” I joked, “but how is it that he likes me?”

“He likes you because you’re not a snob,” she said. “He thinks that adversity made you stronger. For him you are a boy of a good family with the strength of the working class.”

“I see,” I said. Felipe was right: I was stronger than I was before. However, I would give up my strength in exchange for a more comfortable life. Adversity can be exhausting.

“I don’t want to be here anymore,” said Cristina suddenly. She barely sipped her ice coffee and I just took two bites of my sandwich. She asked for the check and Alejandro gave it to me. I put some cash on the dish.

“Let’s go to the park,” ordered Cristina. “It’s the only place where we could have a little privacy.”

Forestal Park continued from downtown Santiago to Las Condes, passing through Providencia. Last time I checked it was still there. We were walking among the trees and I was trying to decipher this amazing woman. She cursed like a sailor and in those times women were not supposed to use bad language. However, even her cursing was gracious and her voice seemed made of silk. I was falling more and more for Cristina. It was easy: she was unique. Her uniqueness, however, wasn’t appreciated by most of the people of her social status. She was not Catholic or even Christian and she had no shame in saying that she considered that religion was a stupidity. She declared herself a freethinker, and for some reason many men of her university thought she was easy. As she wasn’t, they spread the rumor that she was a lesbian. Fortunately for me, that was absolutely false. I had the joy of knowing that for sure. The rumor was only because different people were considered Communists

or Homosexuals and she was certainly a strange character. She wasn't interested in politics, so the progressive people – who should be her natural friends – thought that she was conservative. That was because the General used to talk bad about “those politicians” and the people who supported him used to say that they were not in politics. Cristina wasn't in politics and that was the truth. Political differences were very important in those days and Cristina's father also had a high rank in Pinochet's Dictatorship. She was an outcast, like I was. Well, she was not an outcast in the way I was, but being an outcast is always the same.

That day in the park, I had not yet learned who that gorgeous woman was, and for me she already was just the most fascinating creature I had ever seen. I took her hand and she gave me a smile. She let me walk hand by hand with her for a minute or more and then she suddenly dropped my hand.

“Excuse me,” she said faking being offended, “but what were you thinking?”

“I don't know,” I answered. The question took me by surprise.

“Do you believe you are my boyfriend or something?”

“Well, I don't know, am I?”

“How am I supposed to know?” she almost convinced me that she was angry, but she over acted a little bit to make clear that she was flirting. “You didn't ask me to be your girlfriend and *rites are necessary*.”

I had not read *The Little Prince* yet, so I didn't recognize the quote. It was considered a chick's book. However, everything seemed logical and somehow right.

“Would you like to be my girlfriend?” I asked.

“I don't know, maybe,” she said.

“What kind of answer is that?”

“I’ve just met you!” she exclaimed, “You didn’t kneel or do anything truly romantic.”

I was about to kneel, but then I just remembered something written in the *Manual of the Official*: “What is good? — All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man.” At this point I already finished the reading of both manuals and I felt wise and powerful, even though I didn’t know that the sentence was taken from Nietzsche – it wasn’t properly quoted in the book.

“That’s impossible,” I said, “how could you love a man who cannot preserve his dignity before you?”

She looked into my eyes and the beauty of her big green eyes was almost painful, then for the first time she kissed me. It was the first time that a woman kissed me. I mean I certainly kissed some girls before, but this was the first time that a woman took the initiative in the kissing process. This was not a woman that just let me take her, but she was taking me.

“You certainly can be my boyfriend,” she finally said. “You certainly are my *moonchild*.”

I thought that my heart was about to explode. I almost said that I loved her just then. I was so moved that I didn’t even ask her what a *moonchild* was supposed to mean. I learned the meaning of it later. The consequences of that ritual were horrible.

In that glorious and still innocent day, we talked about those unimportant things, which are the most important between a man and a woman. She was about

to finish college and her major was journalism. I learned she was a Sagittarius and she loved me being a Scorpio. Astrology was not in the manuals I had, but I learned that there was an astrology manual for the use of the members of the Astrum Aureum Society. I tried to read it later, but it didn't make any sense and astrology wasn't part of the mandatory syllabus of the order, just a tool available for those brothers who were gifted for it. Certainly that wasn't my case.

"How is it that your father allows you to know these secrets? You know more than I do about the society," I asked. I wonder how didn't she realize that I had been only in one meeting in *Stonehenge*.

"It is because I am his lovely baby and he never says no to me," she said, "and also because of..." she made a mysterious pause.

"Is it just because of that?" I asked. For some reason I didn't buy her version.

She looked down as if she was discovered in a childish lie. Her eyelashes seemed perfect. Men are basic creatures. We normally look at women's legs or breasts. When I began to look into her eyes, I knew I was in trouble.

"It's a secret," she said. "But in Europe there is a women's chapter of the society, and they are planning to open one in the United States."

"Where in Europe?" I asked.

"In Bayreuth," she said, "that's in Germany. But I don't speak any German, in spite of my German grand parents, and I want to go to New York to participate as a sister of the Astrum Aureum Society. Then I will become the Great Mistress of the *Stonehenge* of Santiago. That's my highest dream and..." she made another mysterious pause.

“And?” I asked.

“The rest is a secret, my *moonchild*.”

“Why do you call me *moonchild*? What does *moonchild* means?” this time I could not avoid noting the peculiar expression.

“When I am sure that you are my *moonchild*, I will tell you what it means.”

She kissed me again. “Have this for now,” she said, “or you don’t want my kisses?”

I certainly wanted her kisses.

This was the first time I met a woman with such dreams and so much mystery. Then I met several of them in the United States, but Cristina will always remain unique for me. However, the Astrum Aureum Society is still a gentlemen’s club. The power concentrated in the male and bigger section is incomparable with the scarce influence that women’s branches have. Women are more concerned about the doctrine and take most seriously the esoteric part of the Astrum Aureum Society. Nevertheless, they are still out of the game of power and their chapters are just like some new age organization. Female chapters are separated and forbidden for most of the men, but being the Great Master had its prerogatives. Five times a year, men and women organize parties together. Their purpose is matching couples, of course. Part of the agenda of the traditional center of the Astrum Aureum is to maintain the status quo in that aspect – and in every aspect: the status quo is the best condition for the developing of the society. In the seventies and the eighties, female chapters were nearly a dream, and in Chile they were Cristina’s dream only. The first female chapter in Chile was opened as late as 1999, more than twenty years after. Cristina never was the Great Mistress and the Chilean male *Stonehenge*

never recognized women as equals. They didn't even fake it, as they did in the United States.

That day we were young and we lived in our dreams. It came time to go to dinner. Because of the curfew, I also was invited to stay at Felipe's house. Cristina just stopped a taxi and for me that was a luxury I hardly could afford. The trip to her house seemed to be eternal. Fortunately it was true she lived very near to Providencia, in a big white house and the trip was short and cheap – last time I've been in Chile, I think it was in 2007, I passed in front of that house. It was at the beginning of Las Condes Avenue and then it was some advertising agency. Glass monstrosities had replaced many of the houses of the neighborhood. Seeing Cristina's house gave me some sense of permanence. That sense of permanence was an illusion, of course.

I remember the decoration, the antiques. They didn't buy most of the furniture, but they inherited it. Every chair had a piece of history: one was bought in Paris by one of the grandmothers and shipping it to Chile was more expensive than the chair itself. An oak hand carved server was the favorite piece of the great grandmother, and Felipe's desk was the desk of his grandfather who was the Secretary of Education in the administration of a president I cannot recall.

When we first arrived at the house I tried not to seem too impressed.

"Nice house," I said in the most casual way possible.

"Do you think so? I think it's just like a mausoleum," she observed.

Cristina's commentary was certainly the remark of a spoiled rich child; nevertheless, in the General Cemetery of the city, her family had a mausoleum that was very similar to the house. She rang the bell.

"I'm too tired to look for the keys in my purse," she said. Nobody opened the door for fifteen seconds. Cristina attached her finger to the bell until a small woman finally opened the door.

"Cristinita," said the woman in a maid's uniform, "it was just you. I thought it could be the army!"

"María, please!" answered Cristina, "Dad works for the administration and we are not Commies! Why do we have to fear from the army?"

She entered the house and let her body fall randomly on a couch in the lobby. Her dress went up and it let me see her monumental open legs in their entire splendor.

"Cigarette," she said.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Do you have any cigarettes?" she replied, but I had not.

"María!" she yelled.

María came back to the lobby.

"What do you want, Cristinita?" she asked. "And please don't scream like; you will kill me with a heart attack!"

"Cigarette?" said Cristina, wearing her irresistible baby face.

María opened a drawer that was in a table two steps from Cristina and took out a pack of cigarettes.

"You spoiled little girl," said María. "You will suffer so much just because of that."

María took a small piece of armor that was on the table and it happened to be a lighter. She lighted Cristina's cigarette.

"Thank you, María," said Cristina. "I love you."

She kissed María's cheek and the old woman smiled.

"One gets too attached to these spoiled kids and they do whatever they want with one," María told me and then she went back smiling to where she came from.

"I am coming to the lobby!" theatrically said the voice of a woman. "I would like to see my daughter sitting straight, with her legs closed and her dress covering a decent part of them! Otherwise, I swear that I'll kill myself, if a heart attack doesn't kill me before."

Cristina sat properly and the older version of her entered in the room. She was wearing glasses.

"Hello," she said to me. "You must be Osvaldo. I am Cristina. My husband named our daughter after me; he thought it was romantic. By doing that he created a new universe of complexities."

"Nice to meet you, Madam," I said.

"You look like a civilized young man!" exclaimed Cristina's mother. "That's a real novelty in this house!"

"Mom!" said Cristina.

"Excuse me but it's the truth!" replied Cristina's mother. "When your classmates were here *studying*, they looked like a bunch of savages."

Cristina just kept quiet and seemed very angry.

"Please come to the dining room," demanded Cristina's mother. "Dinner will be served in five minutes, even if your father is not here by then. We need some order in this house."

I was about to go after her, but Cristina didn't move.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Why she has to be always criticizing me!" said Cristina.

"I think that's a mother's job," I replied. My mother didn't criticize me that much, but I thought that was the right thing to say.

"Maybe," she said.

She stubbed her almost new cigarette in a bronze ashtray and we went to the dining room.

Old Cristina's long black dress had big red flowers and it was made of a delicate fabric whose name I don't know. It left her ankles and her black traditional stilettos uncovered. I thought that she wore stilettos even in bed. The dining room had big windows that looked out on a very beautiful back yard. The walls were beige and there were portraits on it.

"Please meet the family," said Cristina's mom.

"She means the dead relatives that are watching us from the walls and from hell," said my new girlfriend.

"My daughter is always so charming and original," said her mother. Cristina sat and seemed that she was about to cry, but she didn't. Instead she smiled at her

mother. I wondered why mothers and daughters had to have that complicated relationships sometimes.

The table was big and it was formally prepared. I thanked my mother in silence for teaching me how to eat at a formal dinner. This was my first one outside home. Fortunately when I was a child, my mother used to serve the food in formal style to educate me about how to eat.

“You have to remember that you are not a *roto*,” my mom used to say. “Your father was a judge and you come from a very good family. You have to learn good manners.”

When I was a child, I felt like a kind of hidden prince and I didn’t like that. I wanted to be on the streets playing with the other kids, and I didn’t want to seem a snob. Cool kids were mostly street-wise *rotos* until I was a teenager. However, Mom finally educated me as a gentleman and I did not become a *roto*, but a shabby-genteel. I didn’t think people ate like that anymore. The education my mother gave me finally became useful.

“Please, be seated,” said Cristina’s mother, “you here, and you here, please.”

She put us at the opposite sides of the table; I think now that she did it to prevent any under the tablecloth action.

“Isn’t Felipe dining with us?” I asked.

“Well, he should be here,” said Cristina’s mother, “but this is not a restaurant and we need some rules to live like decent people and not like those anarchist Communists.”

I didn't correct her, but last time I checked, Communism and Anarchism were two different doctrines.

We finally sat. She was about to ring a small bell, but the sound of a motor and a claxon interrupted her.

"There's Felipe," she said. "He was almost punctual this time."

The door opened and while the chauffeur put the car in the garage, Felipe entered by the front door. He went directly to the dining room.

"Hello everybody, please don't wait for me. I going to wash my hands and I'll be here right now." Felipe took the bell and rang it. His wife looked at him as if he was undermining her authority on the house issues. Felipe didn't notice it or just didn't care.

María came with a tureen and then she served soup for all of us. Even in my waiter period at the Officers' Club, I've never served a soup in that manner. My mom had a tureen among her junk – or antiques, as she liked to call her things – and she kept it for a special occasion. I don't remember her using it ever.

The soup was very good. I asked what kind of soup was. Cristina's mother told me the recipe in detail, but I cannot recall it. Then we had an avocado starter. That is a typical Chilean dish so I was familiar with it, however it was especially good. The hostess didn't want to reveal this particular secret. She said she would reveal it to her daughter the day of her engagement. Young Cristina didn't look very enthusiastic about that. After that they served beef with some sauce and mashed potatoes. Red meat was still a kind of luxury then and finding meat of good quality was hard; the economy was not entirely recovered – it never was. The dessert was

something very good. I don't remember its French or Italian name. I liked it and I'm not especially fond of sweets.

As the food was perfect, the conversation was a little bit tense.

"What do you think about our guest?" asked Felipe of his wife. I didn't expect an honest answer because I was there.

"Until now he is charming and he made me think that maybe humanity is not going back into monkeys, at least not all of it. Sadly, some other young people presented too much evidence of declining." Then she looked at me. "Please, don't misunderstand me, you are certainly a swallow, but you are not enough to make a summer. However, I find your presence here refreshing!"

I still had my hair very short because of the Officers' Club policies, but not short enough to look like a soldier. That gave me a conservative appearance and I guess she liked that. I also didn't call her 'aunt' as it was the increasing custom among the youth of the upper classes. Some of the old representatives of the Chilean pseudo aristocracy thought that it was infantile and I didn't know what else.

"My friends are not monkeys, Mom!" said Cristina. She wasn't close to her classmates. Cristina wasn't a girl with many friends and her social success was merely superficial. However she wanted to contradict her mother.

"Ok, we don't need to start a fight," said Felipe. He seemed to be a referee between the two women and it was funny. I had the sense to avoid laughing, yet I smiled a little. "Osvaldo was fired by mistake from the Department of Housing, but he will be back in the government soon."

“Were you already working and not in college?” asked Cristina, the mother – yes, the custom of naming children with the name of their parents could be annoying. She asked because I looked younger than I was. At that age that was mortifying and now it would be a blessing.

“Yes, I was,” I said. “A man has to work.”

“Please say that again,” joked Felipe. But his wife gave him a dangerous look, so I thought it was better to be quiet.

“How old are you?” asked me the mother.

“I am 25.”

“You look like a boy of eighteen, but you are a grown man!” The hostess seemed impressed.

“Some times it gets me into troubles,” I said. “I think I am not convincing as an authority figure.”

“No, you are not,” said my hostess, “but don’t worry, the years will find you sooner or later.”

She was absolutely right about years finding people. However, Cristina, the mother is still alive in Chile and she is still a famous socialite. I didn’t know it at the time, but she was already on the board of the Opera House and the president of a charity whose name I conveniently don’t remember. Everything she did she did pro bono. In my miserable condition, I could not understand how working pro bono was even possible.

I don’t know if it was last year or the year before, when somebody tried to take her purse on the street and she defended it. The robber escaped with empty

hands and she was on the cover of Chilean newspapers. I guess she didn't like the cover: her natural habitat was the social life section.

"How is college?" asked Felipe.

"Boring," answered Cristina. She was amazingly quiet in the presence of her mother.

"Don't you like your major?" asked Felipe.

"Yes, I do," she said, "but cool people are leftists and they don't like me because of the obvious."

"Well, these are difficult times," said Felipe.

"People of the right only go to church and think about getting married as virgins," said Cristina.

Felipe almost choked.

"Of course one has to be a virgin you marry, Cristinita!" said her mother. "It's your fault because you didn't want to raise her as a Christian, Felipe!"

"Please, Cristinita, say you are sorry to your mother," begged Felipe.

"I don't want to!" said Cristina.

"I insist!" said Felipe looking directly into his daughter's eyes.

"Ok, I am sorry, Mom," said Cristina.

"No, you are not," said her mother.

"Come on! The girl is sorry about what she said!" said Felipe. "And you bet I am sorry too."

"She is sorry about what she said, but she isn't sorry about what she thinks," said Cristina.

“Well, if that’s somebody’s fault it’s mine,” said Felipe. “I always encouraged her to think on her own.”

“I know,” said the mother. Then she looked at me. “Are you a good Christian, Osvaldo?”

“I don’t know.” The question took me by surprise.

“Or are you a free thinker?” she asked, But she didn’t give me time to answer. “Sorry for my impertinence,” she said. “Those are not subjects for the table.” I think she guessed I wasn’t. She rang the bell and María came with a coffee pot. It was real coffee and not instant coffee, which was the common way of drinking coffee in Chile in those years.

“I hope you like real coffee, Osvaldo,” said Cristina the mother, “that new instant coffee is just unbearable to me.”

For some mysterious reason, Chileans preferred instant coffee. Probably it was because of the aggressive marketing campaign Nestlé displayed during the sixties and the seventies. Instant coffee was considered modern, practical and sophisticated. I never was of that opinion and I thanked her for my real coffee sincerely.

The mother sipped her coffee and looked at her daughter with deep sadness. I realized that she was totally disappointed with her daughter’s ideas. I wondered how it was that she married a guy like Felipe. She never told me and I never asked, especially after her husband’s name became a bad word.

“You will excuse me, please,” said the mother, “but I am a little bit tired, so I will go to my bedroom already. It was absolutely delightful to meet you, Osvaldito.”

She paid a sad look to her daughter and it was answered by a defiant look from her. She rang the bell and María started to take out the dishes in silence. With a sad smile she retired to her bedroom on the second floor.

“Honey,” Felipe said to his daughter, “please, try not to upset your mother.”

“But she is so tight and she is always bothering me!” said Cristina.

“You know she is a devoted Catholic and she is so worried about your not being one!” said Felipe.

“I don’t believe in that bullshit,” said Cristina recovering her sailor language.

We heard a door close on the second floor. Felipe opened a cabinet and took out some Chivas Regal and three glasses. Cristina went to the kitchen and came back with a bottle of Coke and some ice. She mixed her whisky with Coke.

“Cristinita does that because she is a girl,” said Felipe. “I hope you are a heavy drinker. I don’t trust men who don’t drink alcohol.”

Like most of the Chileans of the seventies, I’ve never tried whiskey before. The Chilean economy was closed and protectionist before Pinochet, and most of the products available for the common Chilean citizen were only domestic. Imports were beginning, but something like Scotch was still a privilege and Chivas is still a luxury in almost every country. Later I became fond of single malts. That night, however, I felt as if my throat was under attack by little highlander warriors with torches.

“You can mix it with Coke,” said Felipe. But I denied drinking in the same manner my girlfriend did and I continued drinking on the rocks. After a while my throat got used to it. It was nice.

"Please, Cristinita, I beg you don't upset your mother," Felipe insisted, "you've plenty of freedom and I think that respecting to your mother is not much to ask from you.

"Ok," said Cristina reluctantly.

"I hope that by now you are fully aware of the rites and the doctrines of the Society, dear brother," Felipe told me.

"Yes, dear brother," I answered. The treatment still felt weird.

"Good," said Felipe. "What do you think about what's happening?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean in the country," said Felipe. "As you have seen in *Stonehenge*, the Astrum Aureum is beyond politics. You are not talking to a government official, but to your brother. Please speak freely."

"Well, they fired me without any cause," I told him. "Except that I had the wrong mentor." For some reason I didn't talk about the beating in the Officers' Club. I trusted Felipe, but I think I was ashamed of being a victim.

"Well, these fucking soldiers are not the most intelligent people of the world," said Felipe, "but you have to admit that Allende's chaos had to have an end."

"But what about the disappeared and tortured people?" I asked.

"Well, officially there are no disappeared or tortured people," said Felipe, "but there are. I admit this before you because you are my brother."

"How boring!" Cristina said.

"You pay attention too!" said Felipe. "One day you'll be the Great Mistress of the women's *Stonehenge* of Chile."

"But you are talking about politics," said Cristina.

"Politics are ruled by karma laws," said Felipe, "just like everything else."

"My karma is my mom!" said Cristina.

"Your mom is a wonderful woman!" Felipe severely said. "She is very kind, beautiful and you look so much like her."

"Physically speaking, only," said Cristina.

"You have to understand that almost all of the people are infected by the virus of Christianity," said Felipe. I was impressed. I've never even thought that one could talk that way.

"She is always doing all that charity!" complained Cristina.

"What's wrong with charity?" I asked.

Cristina and her father looked at each other and smiled.

"Should we tell him?" asked Cristina.

"I think we should," said Felipe.

"When you do anything to avoid other people's suffering, their suffering passes to you," said Cristina.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"For every time my mom helps other people, she is accumulating their suffering for this or the next life," said Cristina.

"Well," said Felipe, "that's what would happen if I didn't perform certain rituals to purify her suffering. Come with me."

"No way, Dad," said Cristina. "I will go to sleep, I don't need to go there again."

Cristina didn't say goodbye, but just went upstairs. I looked at her legs as if I was a school kid while she was going up the stairs. If her mother was like her when she was young, I understand why her father married her. But Cristina's mother was a charming woman: she was strong, – as it was proven later by her amazingly long and active life – elegant, still very beautiful, and with a sense of style that didn't pass to her daughter. Young Cristina was like a wild horse. Her loving father didn't only spoil her, he also gave her the philosophical justification for her becoming much more than a free woman. Even I think it was the wrong philosophy, it gave her an unsuspected degree of freedom for a Chilean woman of her age and class. In any case, I think her strength came mostly from her own guts.

We entered into the kitchen and it was bigger than the living room of my apartment. Its equipment was better than the one of *Génova's* kitchen and only comparable with the kitchen of the Officers' Club. Inside there was also a small dining table and I guessed that María had her dinner there. Later I knew that they had also a cook who was also called María, as most of the humble women of my poor country were called.

We went out and it was dark already. I don't know what time it was because I wasn't wearing my watch. Of course I would sleep there, as it was the new custom after the curfew. Chileans liked late dinners, with wine and long conversations. That's why the dinner service at the restaurants was almost suspended.

We walked to the end of the backyard. The garden was big and it had different kinds of flowers. I could only recognize the roses. They had also a lemon and an orange tree among other ornamental trees whose names I don't know. At the

end of the backyard there was dovecote and a shed beside it. As it was dark the doves were sleeping. All of them were white pigeons with a tail that looked like a fan. I don't remember the name of that kind of dove, but it isn't the kind that one can find in the squares of the world.

"Take this." He gave me his keys. Then he entered the cage and took two of the sleeping doves. He came out holding them delicately and I had to close the door of the big cage. I think that there were like fifty doves there, but I didn't count them. "Please open the shed," he said.

I opened and we entered. There was a light, a stone, and the two pentagrams of the Astrum Aureum Society manuals painted on the wall. I guessed what was going to happen, even though this wasn't in the manuals that Felipe gave me in the temple.

"You know that reality is rational and it has an order," said Felipe while he was putting the doves on the stone and tied their tiny legs using a shoelace for each one. The stone had bloodstains and I thought I was about to be sick. "That order of the reality is altered every time someone like Cristina – my wife, not my daughter – does something like direct a charity organization."

He opened a small cabinet and he extracted a dagger. This one was different from those I had seen in the temple. This one was much smaller and it was inside of a red velvet bag. Its steel blade shone with the electric light inside the shed.

"I can't forbid her to do her charities," he continued. "She had a strong Christian education and she would never understand that every time you heal the

suffering of another person for free, the suffering chases you and it will get you in this or in one of the next lives.”

I didn’t say anything because I was still sick because of the anticipation of the blood. Felipe took out his shirt and wore a plastic white apron. The emblem of the Astrum Aureum Society was printed on the front of the apron. There was another one just beside the place where he took his.

“Please put the apron on and I strongly recommend you take off your shirt,” he said. I did as he told me.

“I need to restore the order in the world,” he said. He lighted four black candles that were surrounding the stone in the center. “Thelema,” he said putting his fist with the dagger on his chest. “We are one in all and all in one. We are in the magic light of the Astrum Aureum. With the power of Thelema I restore the suffering taken by my wife from the world, and I restore the equilibrium! Konx Om Pax.” I never new the meaning of those words together. I know that ‘pax’ means peace, ‘Om’ is a Buddhist mantra, and Konx it supposed to be an Egyptian word. The whole expression is supposed to mean ‘light in extension.’ They claim that it was used in the Eleusinian mysteries, a secret cult of classical Greece.

He cut off the head of a dove and let it bleed into the ground.

“Evohe! Evohe! Evohe!” he yelled. The meaning of this word wasn’t in the manuals. It was absolutely secret. So secret that nobody in the order knew the meaning of it. Amazingly, the only one who knew about this was Rafael. He told me that *Evohe* was the chant of the maenads in the ancient Greek, the women who invoked Bacchus.

Then he put the body in a plastic bag. The only important substance was the blood. The rest of the body was just garbage. He opened his arms to the symbols on the wall.

“The equilibrium is restored in my concern,” he said. “In the name of Thelema, deliver my house from evil. Amen.”

“Amen,” I repeated. I think it was reflex.

Then he turned to me and gave me his dagger.

“There is a dove for you,” he said.

My hands trembled. There is no need to say that my performance of the ritual wasn't as clean and perfect as his. This was the first time I killed something with fewer than six legs and it was a mess too hard for me to remember. It is a miracle that I did not cut myself and get an infection. Only my pride kept me from to start crying. However, at the end of the ritual I was euphoric because of the adrenaline. I put the dead bird in the same bag.

“The dagger is now yours, my dear brother,” he said. I cleaned it using a paper towel and alcohol and then I put it in the red bag. He didn't explain it, but performing this ritual made me eligible for the upper and even more secret chapters of the Astrum Aureum. His giving me the dagger meant that I was under his protection until his death and even after. It was because of what happened that night that I became the Great Master of the United States' *Stonehenge*.

That day, however, I was just trembling. I washed my hands in a tap that was inside the shed and then I put my shirt on.

We went back to the house and I was still trembling. I think I wasn't scared, but just overexcited.

We went back to the dinning room and Felipe poured another scotch for me. I indeed needed that one.

"You know," he began, "President Allende wanted equality for all Chileans, but equality is impossible. Some of us are meant to rule and some others are to obey. In that sense we agree with the Opus Dei, but for different reasons. They say that people are where they are because God wants them to be there. We know that people are determined to be where they are only because of their nature and their strength! Not because of any God of prudish people afraid of their own genitals! Not all the members of the Astrum Aureum agree with me, but I think that Pinochet is the natural way to restore the equilibrium and I am not talking only about the economy, but about the occult laws that rule the world and also economy."

I just nodded. My adrenaline didn't permit me to understand what he was saying, but it engraved his words with fire in my mind. I remember that night as if it was yesterday and it was more than thirty years ago. Only a long time later, I understood that that doctrine was perverse. Unequal societies are cruel societies and they can never become stable.

"The bathroom is on the second floor, at the end of the corridor," said Felipe. I think he guessed I needed some rest. "The bathroom door on the right goes directly to the guest room. It is prepared for you."

We went upstairs and we said good night in front of his room. I continued down the beige corridor and I ignored an engraving by Roberto Matta on the wall,

because I was totally ignorant about art. I entered the bathroom. It had a big tub and I thought about using it, but I was too tired to fill it. Instead I just put myself under the hot water and I watched again how the Maybelline eyeliner was water resistant, because the fake tattoo I drew in my arm resisted the shower. I looked at my face in the mirror. It certainly was a baby face: my beard didn't even grow fast enough to provoke a shade at that time of the night – I don't know what time it was, but it was surely at least past eleven.

I went to the guest room naked, using the door that Felipe told me to use. When I came in I found the light on and Cristina more naked than any other woman I saw before on the bed. She sat there and looked directly into my eyes.

“What took you so long? Did you find the sacrifices stimulating?”

I didn't answer but I just stood there looking at her like an idiot. Fortunately she was more intelligent than I was.

I don't know exactly when they made feature movies like *Deep Throat*, *Last Tango in Paris*, or *Emanuelle*. They were censored in Chile and I watched them many years later. Chilean sexuality was innocent, prudish, and not very creative in the seventies. While Americans were reading Masters & Johnson, using cocaine, and organizing orgies, most Chileans were having sex in the missionary position and believing that any other way of sexual performance was a sin; even if they could think about them. I wasn't a prude, but Cristina demonstrated that my creativity was far below acceptable standards. She turned off the light, and began that night emulating the movie *Big Throat*.

“They would find us!” I whispered.

“My will is my only law,” she said quoting Aleister Crowley – the English Magician who was very near to the doctrines of Astrum Aureum Society.

After destroying and reconstructing me three times in positions I didn’t know before, and doing things beyond my poor imagination, she returned to her bedroom using the other door of the bathroom. She left me exhausted and absolutely in love with her and her monstrous and delightful way of love.

I cannot describe exactly how I felt next morning. Happy is a good word and *like a virgin touched for the very first time* is another good one, together with all the clichés and all love songs of history. If Rafael was alive, he certainly could find some better quote from some proper classic Greek poet. My literary skills are limited and some time later, Madonna’s song was every morning in my alarm clock, making me remember Cristina.

My fake tattoo was almost erased, but I was wearing a shirt with long leaves and I risked my cover by not drawing it again. I had left my eyeliner at home. I took my shower and it felt especially good. I didn’t brush my teeth because I also forgot my toothbrush; therefore I limited my mouth cleaning to a mouth rinse with water. There was nothing as fancy as oral rinses in the Chilean market yet. I dressed up, made my bed, and went down stairs. I saw Cristina’s mother sitting at the table. She was alone.

“You are awake!” she said surprised.

“Good morning, madam,” I said.

“The protocol says that you can call me just Cristina after sleeping in my house,” she said. Something in her look told me that she wanted to say, “and with my

daughter,” but it is also possible that that was only my own guilt and paranoia. Sleeping with a girl in her parents’ home was not the usual protocol in the old fashioned Chilean society. In my personal case, it wasn’t properly a moral guilt, but just an issue of good manners.

“Good Morning, Cristina,” I corrected.

“Good Morning, Osvaldito,” she said using the ‘ito’ suffix, treating me like a child, “please have breakfast with me, these two sleep late on Sundays because they don’t have to go to church. Sorry, I guess you neither go to church.”

“No, I don’t, Cristina,” I answered.

“What made you past from God?” she asked me.

“I don’t know. I guess that I wasn’t with him the first time.”

“Is your mother a good Catholic?” asked Cristina.

“She is the best Catholic.”

“And your father?”

“I actually don’t know. If I believe my mom, he was the best man on earth. He died when I was very young and I barely remember his face or his voice. I cannot talk too much about him because it is still a hard subject for my mother.”

My father died in a traffic accident. He was walking and he simply didn’t look before crossing the street. I always thought it was the most stupid way of dying, so I looked both ways every time. It probably saved my life. Now I am dying and the pain isn’t still too hard, but I am weakening very fast. My father was lucky. I always imagined that he was thinking about a complicated case, maybe a murder with many moral implications. Other times I believe that he was just hungry and he

wanted to have lunch. But I was aware even then that my speculations would remain unanswered. Yes, it was a stupid way to die. Nevertheless, I cannot find any intelligent way to do it. Death seems stupid because it reveals the futility of life as mere stupidity. Maybe I cannot find a way to die intelligently, but I still can die elegantly, even though thinking about elegance and death at the same time sounds snobbish and shallow.

While I was telling Cristina the scarce information I had about my father, María served me a hot ham and cheese croissant sandwich and a cup of the real coffee that they used to drink in that house. She also gave me a piece of cake. I think it was the first time when I didn't have a marraqueta¹¹ for breakfast.

"Too bad not having both parents alive being as young as you are," said Cristina. "Mine are both alive and quite well, considering their age. They are from Valdivia and they are German." Valdivia was a city in the south of Chile with a huge German community. That was the explanation for Cristina's blond hair and green eyes. "They are constantly complaining about the cold weather and the eternal rain," she continued. "They say humidity makes their bones hurt. I wanted to bring them to Santiago, but they said that they would die without all that green landscape and the Valdivia River. I think I lost that battle and that their complaining is part of their happiness."

"What about Felipe's parents?" I asked.

¹¹ Marraqueta is a type of bread created in Chile by a baker named Marraquet and it is the most common bread in Chile.

“Well, his father was very famous and there is even a street with his name¹²,” said Cristina. “Felipe admired him very much. He died a few years ago. He was a good man, but not a good Christian I’m afraid. He didn’t enter the church when Felipe and I got married; he waited outside. His mother is still alive or barely. She is in a nursing home. Felipe went to visit her every weekend until a few weeks ago. He said that she didn’t recognize him and that she just sat there looking at some point in the space. Then he stopped going. She doesn’t care if he visits her or not anymore.”

Felipe’s heavy steps sounded from the stairs. He came directly to the dining room.

“Good morning, everybody! You didn’t expect me for breakfast,” said Felipe.

“It’s my fault darling,” said Cristina. “I was very hungry and I asked Osvaldito to join me.”

“Did she ask you for the mass too?” joked Felipe.

“No I didn’t,” said Cristina before I could answer. “I like him for Cristinita and if she knows he is in mass she could dump him away.”

For some reason I didn’t feel ashamed by the obvious implications of Cristina’s mother. It was too soon and too precipitate to think about marriage or even a long-term relationship – anyway, the only long-term relationship allowed then was marriage. Nevertheless, Cristina’s words sounded natural and none of us felt any discomfort about what she said. Sometimes there is harmony in the world and things just flow. It never happened again, not to me.

¹² The original author didn’t give this name because of obvious reasons.

“That’s true,” said Felipe. “She will sleep until noon or even longer, Osvaldo.
Do you want to have lunch with us?”

“I would be delighted,” I said, “but my mother would be totally alone.”

“Invite her too,” said Felipe.

“Felipe!” exclaimed Cristina, “How do you dare to invite a woman with such haste? A woman has to go to the hair dresser, select her clothes...”

“Ok, I got it!” said Felipe. “Please invite her for next week. Let’s plan the details later.”

Cristina looked at her watch, making the most elegant gesture. She was the living portrait of her daughter, but how different she was. My Cristina was an uncontrollable explosion of energy, and her mother was the incarnation of moderation and charm, a totally different charm from her daughter’s.

“I have to go to church,” she said.

“Take the Nova and Claudio with you,” said Felipe.

“Thank you, but I prefer a cab. A car with a driver is too pretentious,” said his wife.

“Yes, but you know the times we are living in,” said the husband.

“They hate you, not me,” said Cristina. “You are the one who works for the General. I just hate politics.”

“Sometimes a man has to serve his country,” said Felipe. “They could hurt you because I love you.”

“I want my normality back!” Cristina surrendered and stood up.

"I can tell Claudio to take you home after he leaves me at the church," told me Cristina.

"Thank you," I said. On Sundays public transportation wasn't very good. Actually it never was. Some friends told me that it is even worse nowadays.

"He is a DINA agent, Osvaldo, please avoid talking too much to him," said Felipe.

The car took us to a parish in El Bosque Avenue. It was a parish with a red bell tower. It is still there and is one of the most fashionable churches of Santiago, partly because it was the church Cristina went to in the sixties or even from the beginning of time. She continued going there until a few years ago, even though she lost her faith much earlier. The church was the center of her social life.

"Have a good day, Osvaldo, I will love to meet your mom next weekend!" said Cristina.

I kissed her cheek and she left the car. As a queen bee, she was instantly surrounded by a swarm of other women and some men. I looked at her from the car and I felt sorry for her for some reason I still cannot understand; I don't believe in premonitions.

"Where do we go now, sir?" asked the driver, speaking for the first time. I could recognize the tone of a junior army officer and it brought me bad memories.

"To San Diego Street, in downtown, *please*," I used the 'please' as a way to tell him that I was not an officer. Not that he could think I was one, but I wanted to make a clear distinction between them and me. I wanted to do it just for my own inner peace.

“Yes, sir,” he said and he never talked again in a thousand years.

My mother’s anger – because I didn’t call her from Cristina’s house – was replaced by panic after she knew she was invited to have lunch at Felipe’s net week. I had never introduced her to the family of any of my previous girlfriends. I had to agree to take her to the flea market. Besides, I had to buy a mirror for my secret rituals of the Astrum Aureum Society.

We had lunch in a modest restaurant on Franklin Street. That was the street of the Sunday’s flea market. We ate empanadas, as it is the Chilean custom for weekends since the independence or maybe even before. In Santiago, people used to buy empanadas to go as a way to give a holiday to the housewife – these days there are many alternatives, like sushi, Chinese food, or fried chicken. The restaurant’s walls were covered by white tiling, and the tables were naked on the dark red floor. Fat old women served the food and the hygiene of the place was controversial. The restaurant was full of people and some babies made it impossible to listen to the music, which was played on the worst kind of sound system ever created. I liked the place. It is not probable that I will visit Chile in the future. If I could, I would like to visit a place like that again. But I am just dreaming. I will never go back Chile again in my life. There is no time.

“I need new clothes!” said my mother that happy day. She was eating her empanada and was as unaware as I was of the happiness of the simple things. For that awareness, we need the enlightenment of a tragedy. My deepest thought then was that for women everything was about outfits. What a blessed shallowness!

My mother bought her things. I don't remember what she did buy that day. Our apartment was the exhibition room for the most amazing variety of things: My mom had an army of toy soldiers in correct formation. They were not the ones I played with when I was a kid, but a collection of vintage soldiers that my mom bought for me when I was seventeen. I was not interested in those toys anymore. She also had a collection of porcelain dolls that looked like dead bodies of girls. It used to freak me out. Fortunately she had it in her closet, and she never looked at it until she found another doll good enough to enlarge her collection. She bought almost any object that called her attention and some of them happened to be really valuable. Her collection of bronze Buddhas was valued at almost five thousand dollars and she bought it for no more than twenty. It took her several years to gather all of them. She was Catholic, but she thought that Buddha images brought good luck, as most Chileans believed. However, most of her stuff consisted of the most worthless objects of the world, and most of it turned into garbage after she died. After her death, a man bought everything – except for the Buddhas and the toy soldiers – and said that he would sell the stuff at the same flea market where my mother used to go. I was already in the United States; therefore Cristina's mother managed everything in Santiago. I gave her the Buddhas, but I sold the toy soldiers in America. Somehow I became allergic to militarism even in that inoffensive form.

Fortunately, credit cards didn't arrive to Chile until the eighties and it was the same with ATMs. If my mom could have had an ATM or a credit card, the flea market would have ruined us. My mother was looking for the most diverse objects, even for the old photographs of unknown people – she also had a collection of those,

but I threw it in the garbage because I thought that having them was a violation of someone else's privacy. Some of the sellers called her by her name and she also knew theirs. Walking slowly because of her distractions, we finally arrived at the bus stop and a bus took us home.

The masculine strength of my youth allowed my mother to buy more things than she usually bought. That was another reason I tried to avoid going with her to the flea market. I put the bags on the floor while I was opening the apartment and I heard the telephone ringing. I quickly entered and I was able to reach the phone.

"Where were you?" said Cristina.

"Hello," I answered, "I am just coming from the flea market."

"Why didn't you stay for lunch?" Her voice sounded imperative. It was a mix of an order and an anxious requirement.

"I can't leave my mom alone on Sundays," I said, "she doesn't have anyone else."

My mom was one floor beneath me and she was carrying her own bags with worthless things. She finally got to the apartment.

"Whom are you talking to?"

"It's Cristina, Mom."

"Oh, please say hello to her." After I told my mom about the house, the food and the whole life style of Felipe's family, my mom didn't have anything against my new girlfriend.

"My mom says hello."

"I need you," said Cristina.

“Cristina says hello, Mom!” I lied. “I miss you too, Cristina.”

“I want you tonight,” she ordered. A woman talking like that to a man in Chile in the seventies was the most outrageous thing. Women were not supposed to like sex and the entire flower revolution was suffocated by the Dictatorship as if it never happened. Besides, the Chilean version of the hippie movement was only a sort of fashion for the upper classes. Guys like me, who had to work for living, couldn’t afford to be hippies: rejection cost money. But Cristina wasn’t a hippie; Cristina was just herself. She could fit very well in the nineties or even in the two thousands. She was far beyond her time.

“I have a friend who lives in an apartment alone and she left me the keys. She is in the south for this week.”

She gave me the address. It was the middle of July; winter vacations just began that Friday.

My mother wanted me to go with her to buy a new dress, but that was too much to ask from a straight male, and it was ok for me to be excused from that duty. I stayed home alone until six o’clock. I installed my new mirror in my spartan room. It had a golden frame and it really contrasted with the one-bed desert that was my old room. I consecrated it following the rituals of the manual of the apprentice:

“In the name of Thelema and the Magic Light of the Astrum Aureum; in the name of Astarot and the One who carries the Light; in the name of Samael and his legions; in the name of the Tetragrammaton I conjure you to fill with power this magic mirror! I conjure the spirits of heaven and hell to obey my will and I seal this pact with my blood! Amen!” I punctured the forefinger of my left hand and I drew a

pentagram and the symbol of the Astrum Aureum Society on the mirror. I used the small dagger that Felipe gave me the night before. After that I started the daily ritual with the variant to conquer a girl. It was not necessary, but I was still an insecure boy.

“In the name of Thelema,” I began, “I submit the will of Cristina to my own stronger and more powerful will.” Of course Cristina’s will was largely more powerful than mine and I knew that even then, when I still didn’t know anything about anything. “If she did not accept presents from me, now she will be giving them, if she didn’t hear my sighs, she will yell for me. In the name of Thelema, and in the name of the magic light of The Astrum Aureum Society, Amen.”

I swear that when I finished I heard a thunder and it started to rain. I believed that it was because of the ritual. Then my mother called me from a public phone.

“Hello, Osvaldito, do you hear me?” she asked. In those days there were not too many phones, but local communications were not that bad. I could hear her strong and clear. My mother was used to old phones and for her making a call was a kind of ceremony.

“Yes Mom, I hear you perfectly.”

“I just found Margarita, do you remember her?”

“Yes, I do,” I lied. I didn’t remember my mom’s friend’s names. But if I said no, she would tell me her story from the moment of her conception, including the name of her parents and maybe even of three generations of ancestors.

“She is a colleague from the school,” she told me, even though I lied to her saying that I remembered her friend. “She invited me to have a piece of cake and she will take me home. She drives a car, so please don’t worry about the rain.”

“Wonderful news! Have fun!” My mother didn’t have many friends and her depression made her stay too much at home. Her going out with a friend was a rare occasion and always a good thing.

“Mom,” I said, but the pay phone cut the communication. I thought that later I would write her a note about my night out.

There is no better show than Santiago in the rain. If the show goes too long, then it becomes a tragedy for the poor neighborhoods. They don’t need a Great Flood of forty days; three days are enough. I felt guilty because I liked rainy days. When I was already in the United States, they told me that they even had a TV marathon once to collect goods for the victims of the rain. It was neither because of a hurricane, nor a flood, but just because of three days of plain simple rain. Fortunately, that day the light rain was the only thing remarkable about the weather. I went out under the rain and the deserted Sunday streets presented their magical grey panorama. I walked and I felt the pleasant sensation of my shoes splashing the water. I think that what I loved the most about those winter rainy days was that the normally contaminated air of the city turned into a fresh breeze full of a different kind of life. The normal life of downtown Santiago was composed of people walking fast and the horrible noise I loved. The Washington area is so silent. Especially Virginia. Until a few years ago, I used invent pretexts to go to New York only for the sake of the urban noise. The air of New York is too clean and it cannot

compete with the dirty air of downtown Santiago. However, some places in Manhattan look just the same as my old city: grey buildings, too narrow streets, and concrete sculptural monstrosities. The Chilean Stock Market is at Nueva York Street and that street seemed to be stolen from Manhattan. The apartment of Cristina's friend was near the Catholic University, downtown, so I didn't need to take a bus to get there.

Downtown Santiago is the only part of the city where I still can move without a map these days. Nothing had changed. Last time I went to Chile, I walked from San Diego Street to the San Borja complex where Josefa's apartment was. She was one of the girls who saw me in Coppelia Café on our first date. That was the day before, but it felt like another era. I could certainly divide my life into before Cristina and after her. The year zero would be 1976. In a visit I paid to Chile in the two thousands, I walked into the same building and I actually asked for Josefa. There was nobody with that name anymore. I don't know what I would do if I found her. We never were on good terms and she thought that I was a bad influence on her friend. Cristina told me that she believed that I was just an upstart and I didn't love her. She was partly right: I was an upstart, but I was in love with Cristina; I still am, I will be until the end of my life. That's not much longer anyway. A love of that kind deserved an eternity. For me this is a demonstration of the inexistence of any god.

The first time I visited the apartment that Josefa's father bought as an investment and that she used while she was studying in college, Josefa wasn't there. Cristina was waiting for me, naked again, and I began to tremble. She kissed me softly this time. She was smoking a hand made cigarette.

"Try this," she said.

I smoked as if it was a normal cigarette. She laughed at me and she taught me how to smoke marijuana properly. They said that it was addictive and only bums smoked it. The truth was that pot was a toy for some rich kids and also a business for some other poor kids, who sold the pot to the rich ones. Being in the middle, I had never tried it before. Besides, it was as if I finished college long time ago; too many things had changed.

"What is this?" I asked with the most embarrassing naivety. Cristina started to laugh and I began to laugh too.

"You didn't know marijuana?" she asked at last.

"I will become a drug addict," I said and I continued laughing.

"You are a drug addict now, Osvaldo."

"Am I?" I stopped laughing.

"Yes you are."

I felt panic. She gave me a serious look and finally said:

"Are you kidding me?" She started to laugh again. "Nobody is an addict to this shit! It's just a lie of the priests and the prude people like my mom!"

She gave me the joint again and we smoked until we finished it.

"I think your hair is awesome," I said. Suddenly *awesome* was the only adjective I could use.

"*Awesome*," she repeated.

At this point and somehow I was already naked. I never was naked with a girl before. Not in the daylight and not in front of an open window of a twentieth floor –

San Borja Towers were some of the first buildings of that height in the country. The window looked to the mountains. Santiago seemed to have a wall made of rock, but the smog did not allow seeing it every day. In that rainy day, the smog was dissipated and they were visible in their entire white splendor.

“Last year,” she said, “I went alone only with my tent and I spent three nights there. I was looking at the stars, and smoking pot. Dad wasn’t working for Pinochet yet, so I didn’t have the escorts.”

“Escorts? What escorts?” I asked.

“That’s how DINA call its discreet bodyguards. Agents follow me wherever I go,” she told me. “It is for my own security. They stay at a discreet distance and nobody notice them.”

“Wow!” I was still impressed about such a normal practice.

“They tell everything to Dad.”

“Are you telling me that your dad knows you are here with me?”

“Well, maybe not at this precise moment, but he will,” she said calmly and I was going into panic again. Maybe it was the pot. “But he is not a Catholic prude and he wants me to be free.”

“Your dad is something,” I said. “He is awesome!”

“May I tell you a secret?”

I looked at that gorgeous naked woman and I told her that she could tell me whatever she wanted.

“My dad initiated me.”

Of course my first thought was the worst. Then I understood she was talking about the initiation into the sacred mysteries of the Astrum Aureum Society.

“I thought that women couldn’t be part of the Astrum Aureum.”

“In Chile they can’t. But after my dad was elected Great Master, he initiated me in secret and then he wrote a letter to the female chapter in Bayreuth. So I am a sister of the Astrum Aureum. As I couldn’t go to the Chilean Stonehenge, my father and I dug a tomb in the back yard and I was in there from noon until midnight. Then he opened the grave and took my oath. They sent me my master’s robe last week. I’ve been a member longer than you.”

I looked at her arm and it was absolutely clean.

“You don’t have the tattoo,” I remarked.

“The rite for women does not requires the tattoo,” she said. “Women are more likely to show their arms. Where is yours?”

I had forgot to draw my fake tattoo. I thought that my whole charade would end. I didn’t know what to say and I felt ridiculous and stupid. Maybe this was the first time when I remembered who I was. Despite Rafael’s advice, being in love with such a creature was enough to forget about everything, even about myself.

“Don’t tell me it was erased!” she said. “That vigilant doesn’t know how to make proper tattoos!”

After my exile and during the rest of my life, I wondered if that was the moment to tell the truth. What would happen if I came out? She would not believe me, as she didn’t the first time in the bookstore. That day I was petrified so I stayed quiet and the problem solved itself. Having control of fate is just an illusion, an

illusion I sold for many years in the Astrum Aureum Society. The future is uncertain, the past is irremediable, and we never know what's happening in the present; that's the whole wisdom I gained in my life.

"Yes, it's true," I said, relieved.

"You are only supposed to show your tattoo at the funerals. If that is the case, please draw one. I can lend you my eyeliner for that. Do you remember how it draws a perfect imitation of a tattoo?"

"Thank you," I said. I did remember the expensive eyeliner.

She took my hand and pointed to the mountains again. Her naked body received the light from the window and her hair seemed to glow like the halo of a naked angel.

"After my initiation, I passed the night there, alone," she remarked. "I was only under the protection of the energy of Thelema and the light of the Golden Star."

"That was very dangerous," I said.

"I had to temper my will and free it from fear," she said. "Sometime I will go again. There I had my first *moonchild*."

"The *moonchild*," I repeated. "What's that?"

"If a woman wants something desperately, she goes to a lonely place and paint the sacred symbols on her skin. Then, naked she waits for the spirit and lets him possess her. It is said that she gives birth to a *moonchild*: a spiritual son. The father of the newborn spirit then gives her whatever she wants."

"You did that?" I didn't know what to say. I didn't even know if I had to feel jealous. "What did you do that for?"

“Because I was so alone,” she said. “I asked the spirit to give me a partner of flesh.”

“Wow,” I don’t know if I was still under the effect of pot, but pot was nothing compared to that story.

“A few months later, I went to the bookstore and I found you wearing the emblem of the Astrum Aureum. I guessed you were my favor, my *moonchild*. The present that the spirit gives is also called *moonchild*. I wasn’t sure, but now I know that you are.”

I was looking at her and I didn’t know what to think.

“He is my spiritual husband now, but the spiritual husband is not jealous of the flesh one. But you have to respect him. If you do, he will also concede favors to you.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I said, because I really didn’t.

She kneeled before me and told me to do the same.

“If I tell you his name, I mean the name of the spirit that I conjured, we will belong to each other forever and nothing can break our boundaries.”

I just nodded.

“The name of our protector is Bentameleon,” she said. “Never forget it!”

I wondered how she thought I could forget a name like that. I actually remembered it my whole life. He was listed as one of the protector spirits of the Astrum Aureum. Only masters had access to the name of those spirits. Their names

were as colorful as Azazel, Belial, Senciner, or Samael, among others¹³. After the Internet came, I finally found that he was not a good spirit, but a demon. However, the gods of some are the demons of others. One thing turned out to be true: I never stopped belonging to her, but I stopped believing that this Bentamaleon had anything to do with that.

“We will never speak his name anymore, not until we need his help.”

I don’t know if I believed what she told me that day. I mean: I would have believed her if she had told me the moon was made of cheese, but I didn’t understand the reach of what she was telling me. Besides, as then she kissed me and took me to bed, the only thing I thought was that a woman like her was awesome. This was still the only adjective I could use.

We woke up early and I prepared breakfast. Cristina said that she was useless in the kitchen and I had some experience in making breakfast. We had some marraquetas from the day before, but toasted they tasted good.

“Josefa will not be here until next week. We can stay here until Saturday,” Cristina told me.

“What will your mother say about it?” I asked.

“I don’t care, she hates me anyway.”

“She loves you. She doesn’t understand you, but she does love you!” I said. There was something in Cristina’s mother that made me feel some deep pity. She was a rich and sophisticated woman and also a social success, but she was isolated in some way and she was the real little kid in that house: the one that didn’t share

¹³ Neither Osvaldo I did changed these names. He wanted me to be faithful at this point.

the great secrets. I was sure that she was aware of her diminished status and that she resented it in some deep part of her soul.

“Do you think so?” asked Cristina with a sad look.

“She is not an adept of the Astrum Aureum Society,” I said. “She is not aware of the laws that rule the Universe, she is not connected to Thelema, and she is unable to do her own will.”

“You’re right,” she said. “I’d never seen it in that way before.”

I was about to feel like a hero, but she continued:

“I will not care about her anymore, she is just weak. She would be better dead. Her life is worthless anyway.”

I looked at her and dropped a dish on the hard floor of the kitchen. We were having breakfast there and wearing what we preferred: absolutely nothing.

“You dropped a dish!” she said. “Josefa will kill us!”

“Sorry,” I took a moment to continue, “but do you really mean what you just said?”

I lived with my own mom and even though I wasn’t her main economic support, I was her only company and I had to care about her constant depressions. Christina’s indifference to her mother seemed monstrous to me.

“What did I say?” asked Cristina.

“That your mama is weak.”

“Well, she is weak!” Cristina just shrugged.

“All of us can be weak in the proper circumstances and she is old and you owe something to her,” I said.

"I guess she is my mom because of a reason, but I cannot understand why. Maybe the answer is in a previous life. I guess it is something I have to do. But I will not obey her. My will is my only law."

"I don't obey my mom either anymore," I looked into her eyes, "but I respect her."

"Whatever," Cristina said. Then she kissed me and she won the argument just like that. If we could marry, she would probably win all the arguments in the same manner. We didn't even clean up the pieces of the broken dish.

We took a shower together and it was the first time I shared a shower with a girl. I had more adjectives in my mind by then, but 'awesome' was still the best of them to describe the breakfast that she gave me under the water.

As the inexperienced lover that I was, I had not brought clothes to change. It was still early so I went home to get fresh clothes. I was walking thinking that life was wonderful and I could dance and sing like they did in those old American movies, but I still had a third world personality. Therefore, I limited myself to a smile that was totally out of place in that cold sunny day of July under the Dictatorship. Cristina wanted me to stay all day, but I still had a responsibility to Rafael. She made me promise that I would be there again at night.

I arrived home and my mother was sleeping on the sofa.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

My mom opened her eyes and jumped into my arms.

"Of my God, you are here! I thought they took you away!" She was covering my face with kisses.

“What are you talking about, I left you a note...” I stopped because suddenly I remembered that I actually didn’t write the note, but just thought about writing it.

“Oh, Mom! I forgot about writing the stupid note! I am so sorry, Mom!”

Those were no times to forget about saying where one was. It was not entirely clear to me yet, but many people were still disappearing and DINA was responsible of that. Therefore, calling the police was pointless. I felt worse than if I was a torturer myself.

“I cannot imagine your agony last night,” I said.

“Well, when I arrived home it was almost the beginning of the curfew, and when it began I was terrify and I thought I would die,” my mother told me. “I went into your room because I wanted to be near you in some way. Then the sheet that you put to cover your new mirror fell and I saw my reflection in it and I suddenly was calm. I had the conviction that you were with that girl!”

“As a matter of fact, I was with her, Mom,” I confessed.

“What kind of girl just sleeps with you that fast?” My mother was trying to be subtle in saying that she thought that Cristina might be a kind of slut. I pity her antediluvian concept of morals.

“Times had changed, Mom,” I said.

“I am an old woman already who doesn’t understand the world anymore,” she complained. Now I think that the fact that Cristina was a woman from a good and rich family made it impossible for my mother to judge her. She would say that my ex-girlfriends were whores if we ever passed a night together with such nerve. With them I always rented a motel room during noon or after work and we always

invented excuses like a trip to the beach to stay together. But Cristina wasn't the kind of woman that needed excuses.

"You are not old, Mom, but just little bit old fashioned," I said.

"You say that because you haven't seen the dress I bought for the weekend." Saying this she went to her room and showed me a dress on a hanger. "What do you think?"

"It's wonderful, Mom," I said but I didn't know the difference between one dress and another and I still don't know. "I have to change clothes to go the bookstore."

"Ok, go." My mom sounded happy.

I went to my room to change and I saw the mirror uncovered. I thanked Thelema and the other spirits for comforting my mother. I wonder how I believed that there were spiritual beings taking care of those colorful details, instead of saving the people who were being murdered. Of course I didn't realize the fundamental irony of my beliefs. I never knew what my mother experienced that night. Later I was convinced that it was just a case of self-deception that happened to be right, even though it was because of the wrong reasons. I closed the door and I performed my rituals whispering, because my mother could have a heart attack if she saw me doing something like that. Then I covered the mirror again.

After I changed clothes I went out to the living room and my mother was still there.

"What will you do today, Mom?" I asked because as a teacher, she was also on vacation.

"I don't know," she said with some melancholy. "Will you be here tonight?"

"No, I won't, Mom," I said.

"You will be with that girl, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mom, I will."

"You are going to leave me," she said.

"Don't say that! I will never leave you, Mom!" I said this thinking that it was true. I finally left her, but it was because of very different reasons. Of course I never stopped taking care of her and we never lost communication. But that wasn't enough. I would like things to be otherwise. That day, however, I really meant what I said. I was already thinking about marrying Cristina and take my mom with us. Of course I was not thinking about asking for her hand that soon, but I certainly would and I did some time after. She said yes, but we were not the masters of our fate after all. My mother would never approve us having sex without being married, not under her roof, and not even if that meant she had to stay alone at night. That was the kind of woman she was and the kind of country we were born in.

I went to the bookstore, and even though I was there late, I had to wait for Rafael to open the business.

"I should have given you a copy of the keys," he said, "but now that you are leaving, it would be pointless."

It didn't know it yet, but that week was the last I worked with Rafael. Felipe found me a job even sooner than he and I expected. It was at the same Department of Housing, but I was far up from where I was before.

The ritual at *Stonehenge* that Wednesday was ordinary, meaning that nobody was initiated. Felipe said the formula for the beginning, and our time and space were declared magical.

“We purify the world of suffering in the accomplishment of the mission of the Astrum Aureum. We keep the knowledge from profane eyes and the words from profane ears. We are the barrier between truth and confusion!” All of this was in Latin, of course. Later I wondered if they wanted to be the barrier to prevent confusion or to prevent people from finding the truth.

Also in Latin, we did the invocations that I did everyday at home, but the atmosphere in *Stonehenge* was different: more solemn and warmer at the same time. As every Wednesday night, an adept exposed some secret aspect of the doctrine. He said that in Spanish, only the formal part was in Latin. Basically the expositions were different examples of the same principles: the power of the will over everything, freedom as supreme good, and the necessity of secrecy. After that, a brother of any rank spoke about some profane wisdom: social studies, art, architecture, science, or whatever. That part of being a member of Astrum Aureum was really good; later I turned into a superficially literate man and an interesting conversationalist at any dinner. That quality really helped in my life and that is the only thing I owe the Astrum Aureum Society. Well, that and the network.

That night, a brother whose name I intentionally forgot spoke about democracy and autocracy. He was trying to criticize the Dictatorship of course. His

speech was received with a cold applause and no questions at the end. I cannot forget his closing:

“A great big cloud flies from the burning palace. President Allende dies in his office. The army kills thousands in the whole country. The Registration Office does not register the deaths, because they are too much for the books. However, General Tomás Opazo Santander says that the victims are just 0.01 percent of the population, and that that is not a high social cost.”¹⁴

After he finished, the air in *Stonehenge* was thick as concrete. In his Great Master’s role, Felipe spoke.

“Dear brothers,” he said, “I know that the situation of our nation is hard and painful for many of you. But as members of the Astrum Aureum Society, we must understand that everything happens because of a reason, and every nation has the government it deserves.”

A murmur of hushed conversations began. Felipe looked at the brothers for a short while and then he put his fist on his heart.

“Thelema,” he said.

Everybody else stood up and put their hand on their chest.

“Thelema,” repeated the crowd.

“We are brothers,” said Felipe.

¹⁴ Osvaldo did not say that this is a quote from Eduardo Galeano’s book *Memoirs of Fire*. I believe he didn’t know that fact at the moment he wrote his notes. However, the text was published only in the eighties. The quote suggests that maybe the person who was reading was in contact with Galeano and was probably a member of the resistance. That also explains the lack of details that Osvaldo gave about him.

“And our brotherhood is bigger than our differences,” answered the crowd in a deep chorus.

Then a deep silence was made. It wasn’t even a minute, but it felt like an eternity.

“We are brothers, and our brotherhood is bigger than our differences,” they all repeated again. And only then the works of Stonehenge were closed.

That night during the banquet, nobody talked about politics anymore. The preservation of the unity of the society was over all. At that point I liked that. While the rest of the country and the world were dying in violence, *Stonehenge* was like a world inside the world in which harmony reigned. I felt extremely lucky.

It was then when Felipe told me that he had the new job for me.

“I hope you don’t mind to go back to the Department of Housing,” Felipe was almost apologizing, “but I couldn’t make it better.”

“It’s just perfect for me,” I said.

“You know that’s the worst department of the whole Government,” he continued apologizing, “but I don’t want you to continue in that bookstore any longer. You are going out with my daughter. She is a spoiled girl with expensive tastes – completely my fault.”

“She is the most wonderful woman I ever seen,” I confessed in spite myself.

“She loves you,” he said smiling. “If you make her suffer I swear I’ll kill you and it won’t matter if you are a brother or not.”

I knew he was talking seriously, but I wasn’t afraid at all.

“It will be good to go back to the old office.” It wasn’t the truth. In the old office would be the same colleagues who stopped talking to me, the same boss that fired me, and the same girl who dumped me. I only said that because I didn’t want to be ungrateful.

“Are you kidding?” he exclaimed. “You are the new Metropolitan Coordinator of the Department. This is the kind of job that requires an oath!”

The same driver took the same people home every night. Inside the car we were quiet. Pato and Carlos were on totally opposite sides about the Dictatorship and they didn’t want to fight. A checkpoint was near a traffic light, so we had to respect it, even though there was an unwritten law that said that nobody was supposed to respect the traffic lights after midnight. Then some guys in civilian clothes passed by. They were taking someone handcuffed and with his head covered by a black fabric bag. When they saw the car, they said something to a uniformed soldier and he stopped us. Our driver opened the window to show his documents and the permit to drive during the curfew. All of us had to show our documents.

“My name is Jaime Correa Tapia,” I heard while the driver had his window opened. “I’ve been illegally kidnaped by the government tonight, please remember my name!” he repeated the same over and over again.

I would like to say that I heroically went down of the car and ordered the security officers to release Jaime. But I didn’t. I didn’t do anything. I cowardly kept sitting in the car and pretended that nothing wrong was happening, like everyone else did. The soldier gave us back our documents and we continued. “This is just the 0.01 of the population and not a great social cost,” I thought.

"I'm sure he is a subversive," said Pato.

On Sunday, Monday and Tuesday Cristina and I slept together at Josefa's. On Wednesday I convinced her to sleep at home because I wanted to check on my mother. It was very difficult to convince her and she remained a little bit mad at me. But I told her that the Astrum Aureum's car had a route and I could not change it. That was true and she had to accept the inevitable. I could try to make arrangements about that, but I was concerned about my old woman.

I arrived home and she was awake.

"What are you doing, Mom?" I asked before saying good night.

"Waiting for you."

I hugged her.

"Don't worry, Mom. I am doing all right. I have a job, Mom, a real job.

Tomorrow I'm going to tell Rafael."

"Holly Mary!" exclaimed my mother. "I knew my prayers would be heard!"

"Well, they were, Mom."

"What kind of job will you have, Osvaldito?"

"I don't know, but I have to make an oath on Friday and I will begin on Monday."

"An oath!"

"Yes, mom, I will back to the Department of Housing and I will have a job that requires an oath!"

"Those jobs are important!"

“You bet they are, Mom!”

Fortunately my mom had her sleeping pills. She would be too excited to sleep otherwise. As if I was her father, I gave her the pill and stayed with her until she was too sleepy to continue.

I took a shower. It wasn't something I usually did at night, unless it was a hot summer day, but we were still in the middle of July. After my mother fell asleep I had a strange sensation of discomfort. I couldn't explain it at the time. The shower helped, but it wasn't enough. I took one of my mom's sleeping pills. I regretted it later.

I was the prey of a nightmare. Under the influence of the sleeping pill, I couldn't wake up.

“I am Jaime Correa Tapia,” said the hooded head once and again. At some point I even knew that I was in a dream, but because of the sleeping pill I couldn't wake up. I used the teachings of Astrum Aureum to control dreams. I had just read them and they were supposed to be difficult to learn, but under my drugged sleeping, I quickly developed the skills.

“This is a dream,” I said. Using my will I dissolved the scene of the checkpoint and I created Josefa's apartment. In my dream, the door of the apartment was the same, but the interior of it was a mansion. Probably my mind built it using fragments of books, movies, and the soap operas that my mother used to listen to on the radio when I was a child. I noticed the difference in my dream, but I thought it was just all right. I called Cristina and she appeared wearing a nightgown that really

surprised me. I never knew I had such taste in women clothes. I don't have it actually, but apparently my unconscious has better taste than I have.

Her body was just her body: identical to real life and as perfect as I've never had before or after. Then, the hooded man appeared and kissed her, even though his mouth was covered by the hood. People sometimes ignore laws of physics in dreams, and I find that particularly annoying.

"I am Jaime Correa Tapia," said the hooded man while he was impossibly kissing my girlfriend.

After struggling to make the hooded man disappear, I finally woke up. It was already the morning after, and the telegram had arrived. It was on the floor in front of the door. The mailman passed it under the door while my mom and I were under the influence of drugs. I read it to confirm what I already knew:

"Congratulations.

"You are the new metropolitan regional coordinator Department of Housing. Oath Friday 10:00 AM Secretary's office."

"Department of Housing."

They sent telegrams, because not everybody had phones like nowadays.

I left the telegram opened on the table and then I went to make breakfast and curse my headache. That was the last time I took any sleeping pill until recently, when the pain began to make sleeping very hard. A happy scream told me that my mother was already awake and saw the telegram.

"This is a quite a job!" yelled my mother while she was looking at the telegram.

After having the same conversation we had the night before and adding some details, I took a new shower and then I went to my room to perform my rituals in front of my mirror.

“I am will,” I said, as the books of the Astrum Aureum taught. “I command the ghosts to leave me alone.”

According to the doctrines of the Astrum Aureum Society, ghosts were real – so were vampires. The manual said that ghosts were dead people looking for justice, as the traditional wisdom used to say. In the same secret teachings, vampires were something different than Dracula; they were common living people able to suck psychic energy instead of blood. None of them were a real danger for the initiated. He was under the protection of the light of the Astrum Aureum Society. If that was true, why was this Jaime haunting me? I didn’t know if Jaime was dead or alive. Some people only were interrogated – tortured – and then released. After the ritual I told myself that there was nothing I could do in such situation, and if I tried, I would probably get killed. That was my only rational thought about the subject.

It took me several years to talk about Jaime Correa Tapia. First I did it in the United States to some people at Amnesty International, and in the nineties I gave a statement again to the Rettig Commission for Truth and Justice in Chile. That day a woman gave me a picture and Jaime Correa had a face for the first time. She was his widow. I kept the picture. I didn’t know her name. She found me out of the building where they were taking the declarations. The Group of Families of the Arrested and Disappeared used to protest there after watching the hearings. They were mostly

women and they wore a picture of their husbands or children on their breasts; they had signs only with one question: "Where are they?"

She and I didn't exchange a word. She just looked into my eyes and then she gave me the picture that she had on her breast. It was a fuzzy black and white picture of a man wearing old-fashioned sideburns. His face was inexpressive and the picture was probably taken from an old ID card. I received the picture in silence, just nodding to thank her. She was a woman a little older than me, maybe of the same age, or maybe even a little bit younger. Poor people age faster.

At the time I'm writing this, they haven't found him yet. He was just one more among thousands like him and I guess that they were far more than the 0.01 percent of the population. Though he stopped haunting me, I do believe in ghosts. They are memories and they are powerful. I also believe in vampires. They are people who pretend to be somebody else to get what they need. I am a vampire, of course.

The day after I met Jaime Correa Tapia on the street, I didn't even talk about him to Rafael and he was my best friend ever, even though I stupidly thought he was naïf. I felt ashamed, a coward, and I was not prepared to confess my sins. That day I only told him about my new job and he decided to celebrate by inviting my mother, Cristina, and me to a restaurant for lunch. The curfew didn't let people celebrate with dinner.

The custom in Chile was that the one who gets a new job or promotion has to invite his friends for dinner. However, Rafael insisted in being the one who paid the bill that day and I promised to invite him the next time. He closed the bookstore early and took us to a restaurant. The place was pleasant, but it was far from fancy.

It was a traditional place that was just beside *The Union Club*, an exclusive club for gentleman. As this restaurant was just beside, it was known as *The Little Union*.

If Cristina attracted the looks in the teashops of Providencia, here she attracted the adoration of the people, who looked at her as if she was goddess.

“What will the pretty lady order today?” asked a waiter who was too old to be impertinent.

She ordered something I cannot recall and she found it delicious.

“This food is wonderful!” said Cristina. “I will tell my parents to come here.”

“This is too humble a place for people like your parents, or even you,” said my mother.

“Do you think that I am a kind of princess or something?” Cristina asked. She looked like a kind of princess or something.

She watched a group of old retired men playing dominoes and sipping wine after lunch; she got fascinated.

“I should bring my camera,” she said.

“I brought mine,” said my mom.

Cristina asked the old men to be in the picture with them as a domino player and of course they said yes.

The decor of the place told the visitor about a glorious past. The walls were covered by mahogany, and there were black and white photographs from the prehistory of the place. Gentlemen with moustaches and ladies with long dresses smiled to us from the walls and the past. The pictures were clear signs of the decline of *Little Union*. It wasn't anymore the place for the rich aristocracy that was leaving

downtown to go to the east side of the city, but a place for plain middle class people as I was until that day. Sometimes I think that if I had a choice, I would remain as a middle class guy with a simple life. Then I remember I had that choice and I was driven by ambition. I am not talking about my infiltration into Astrum Aureum Society, because then I had no choice. I am talking about the choices I made later in my life. Success is a poor substitute for happiness. Well, maybe it is not that poor, but it is certainly a substitute.

Rafael fascinated Cristina to the point that I was almost jealous. Her big green eyes were nailed on his. Cristina used to look frankly into people's eyes. For me, looking into her eyes was hypnotic and a very intense emotional experience. Once I even thought I would cry.

"Her eyes are delightfully painful for the soul," said Rafael to me after that day. "She can make a poet of any man. Take care of her. You will never fall in love again after a woman like Cristina." I sadly and happily have to recognize that he was right.

The conversation we had at *Little Union* was nothing special. Cristina talked about college, her family and some childhood memories. I remembered the *Génova* and my days in the Officers Club – not *that* day – and I laughed about the stupidity of the military. Rafael gave us his poetry declamations by heart and my mom talked about her boys in the school. We were just people talking about everyday things, but it was one of the happiest experiences I ever had! Of course I didn't notice it then. I was too busy being happy to realize that I was absolutely content.

That day I decided to propose Cristina, even though I didn't put myself together to do it yet.

In the scale of the Department, first was the Secretary of Housing, Then National Director of the Service, then de National Coordinator of the Service, and then there were thirteen Regional Coordinators, headed by the Metropolitan Coordinator and that was I!

That Friday at nine o'clock, the National Coordinator of the Service took my oath as the new Metropolitan Coordinator.

"Do you swear before God," he solemnly, but routinely asked, "to defend the Constitution and the laws of the Republic of Chile, and to perform your duty as Metropolitan Coordinator with probity and efficiency?"

"I do," I said and I didn't question how the unconstitutional Government made me take an oath about defending the Constitution. Obviously the oath was a formality remaining from thousand years before, and nobody took the terrible task of changing it.

They took a picture while he gave me my nomination document, signed personally by the horrible Pinochet. This happened in the Secretary of Housing's office, who was absent because he was on an official visit somewhere in the south. I didn't know where the Sub-Secretary of Housing was. The Director of the Service should have replaced him, but he was inaugurating a new complex of houses somewhere on the west side of Santiago, where the poor people used to live. The National Coordinator said the Regional Coordinators used to be the only people who

actually worked in the buildings in normal office time. The office was red carpeted – Felipe’s carpet was grey – and the desk was an antique. Many people shook my hand and congratulated me. I didn’t know any of them.

“Mister Coordinator,” was the salutation I received at Felipe’s that Saturday. My mom was wearing her new dress and she was impressed with the house.

“I’m the old Cristina,” said Cristina’s mom when we arrived. “You must be Mercedes.”

“Yes, I am, Please call me Meme,” she said. My mom hated her name because it was a name for an old woman. Here in America a few days ago, I met a young girl, a Chilean. Her name was Mercedes. Old names are again in fashion in Chile. My mother made me swear that if I had a daughter, I would not name her Mercedes. I only had a son and I named him Norman because he is American, even though he believes he is Chilean. His search for identity in the land of his ancestors is the most American thing he could do. As a good American, he is not happy with being only American and he describes himself as Chilean-American, as if being Chilean was a great thing. I decided to let him believe that if he wanted to.

“Ok, Meme,” said Cristina, “but be proud of carrying the name of your ancestors. Especially in these times of people without a past.”

That day I learned that if my mom could choose to be someone else, she would choose to be Cristina’s mother. She began to imitate her gestures and her language and even her style in clothes. My salary as coordinator later allowed me to give her money to buy her clothes in the same stores in which Cristina’s mother used to buy hers. The only difference was that my mom was unable to wear her high

stilettos, so she had to remain on her lower heels. Cristina also found a wonderful audience in my mother. Later I realized she felt infantilized by Felipe, and her daughter was too different from her to have a proper mother-daughter relationship. My mother and Cristina were two Catholic and traditional women who shared memories from another time – I think there are no women like them anymore, fortunately: they were good people, but their conservative opinions were the source of so much violence. The most important thing for Cristina was that my mother wasn't a rival, but an apprentice, even though she was older – now I believe they could be the same age. Cristina just aged slower than common mortals, as her incredible longevity demonstrates even now. However, I didn't know my mother's exact age. That was her only sign of female vanity after my father died. First I respected it because I thought that vanity was good for her soul; then I did it as the dignity she deserves in death.

Suddenly lives were just harmonic and perfect. While people were dying under one of the cruelest dictatorships of the world, things simply came to their right site for me. Sometimes I think that what happened next was a punishment for my indifference to the pain of others. Nevertheless, I don't believe in any moral order of the Universe anymore. That night, as it will become a custom, only Felipe and I remained talking. I knew Cristina was waiting for me in the guest room – my mother was sleeping in another guest room in that enormous house, leaving me in the most delightful privacy.

"Things happen for a reason and there is an order in the Universe," Felipe told me and I believed him. "A week ago we offered the blood of the doves and now

the order is restored to your life: that's cause and effect. It is a principle discovered by Hermes thousands of years ago, in Atlantis."

At the time I was performing all the rituals prescribed by the book and the Great Master. Even now I have to admit that the correlation between them and the changes in my life was undeniable. But correlation does not mean causation. Later I had to learn that in the most difficult way.

"What about the country?" I asked. Jaime Correa Tapia was a faceless but huge presence in my mind.

"There are these great initiated men and women," answered Felipe. "You know, Buddha, Jesus, Moses, Gandhi, Isis and a long etcetera. They came to Earth to save humanity, but they have to pay for the suffering that they avoided for other people. That was the reason why they usually died violently and with great suffering, like Jesus did. They are part of a group of brothers and sisters and they are more than just men and women. They assumed the human form just for help, but even they had to pay. Are you about to pay the price for helping a whole country? Do you think that the blood of a pair of doves would be enough for that purpose?"

"Are you saying that human sacrifices are needed?" I asked, horrified.

"In a way," he said, "but a human sacrifice has to be volunteer or it will cause ruin to a whole culture, as it happened for the Mayas and the Aztecs. The perfect model for the human sacrifice is Jesus."

I asked why we were not just Christians. He told me that the teachings of the order said that Christians totally misunderstood the message of Jesus. The real message of Jesus wasn't different from the message of Hermes, Lucien Goldstern and

the other adepts of the secret true knowledge. However, this knowledge was secret and Felipe cited the Bible itself to argue his teachings. As I was raised a good Christian and I haven't read most of the Bible yet, I believed when he said that "seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand," meant that Jesus had secret teachings. Of course, those teachings were the same teachings contained in the manuals of the Astrum Aureum Society.

Cristina's amazing sexual performance always improved under her parents' roof. I was more and more in love. I delayed my proposal because I didn't want to look stupid, but her family adopted even my mother, and soon proposing would be the natural thing to do. I confess that I anxiously waited for that moment to come.

The friendship between my mom and Cristina's mother flourished. My mother was a woman with not many friends. I think it was different before the death of my father, but I cannot be sure. Maybe they were like those couples that are friends to other couples and perhaps she forgot how to socialize alone after his death. But I really don't know; she never talked too much about my father except to say that he was a saint, a super man, the man of her life, and a flawless person.

That Sunday, my mom went with Cristina to her parish and then she shifted from her old parish for Cristina's forever. My mother made Cristina go to the flea market and after she reluctantly accepted to go to that proletarian place, she became a fan. She began to buy antiques on a scale that my mother couldn't even dream, and even her enormous house became too small for all the objects that she purchased. She became a compulsive buyer and a few years later, she finally had to open an antique store. My mother was her minority shareholder; they worked

together until my mother's illness. They were a success. Cristina's other friends were too snobbish to put a toenail in the flea market and they had the money to pay the huge prices of the two women. I wasn't in Chile at the time and it was not wise to travel. I knew about the store just by pictures and I regret that. Circumstances did not permit things to be otherwise.

I wonder if happiness is only the product of ignorance: in those days I was happy and ignorant. I'm going to have all the answers soon.

While my mom and her new friend were at the flea market together for the first time, Cristina and I went to Josefa's apartment to clean up and use it until the last minute. The homeowner found us inside – fortunately we were wearing clothes and doing the cleaning. Josefa hated me from the first moment.

"Where did you go to high school?" she asked me. That was the favorite question of the upper class. I answered again and she also asked me if I was a Commie.

"I am the new Metropolitan Coordinator of the Department of Housing," I proudly said.

"A public official," she smiled with contempt.

"He is working for the government," said Cristina.

"Of course he is. Do you like skiing?" asked me Josefa.

"I don't know, I never skied before," I innocently answered. Skiing was the sport of the rich.

She served us instant coffee and then she began to talk about her vacation in some small town whose name I forgot. She had a horse and I do remember his

name: Augusto, the name of the General, of course. I thought Josefa was all right and it was Cristina who told me how to read her attitude.

"She hated you because she is a snob!" she told me later. I saw her smiling all the time and she told us that we would be able to use her apartment every time she was at her father's ranch. I thought that she was kind.

"Didn't you hear what she said?" Cristina asked while we were walking to my house.

"She said that she was happy about having us at her apartment because she felt safer having someone honest looking at it," I answered.

"Someone honest," quoted Cristina, "as if we were her employees or servants."

"I'm sure she didn't mean it that way," I said, but Cristina was right. I was still inexperienced in the subtle ways of showing contempt that Chilean upper class women were able to display. A conversation among Chilean elite women would always look polite and friendly to the outsider. Those conversations seemed to be a pleasant exchange of compliments until one learned how to translate them:

"That dress fits you better every time you wear it," actually means, "can you buy something new to wear?"

"It seems you will never get older," meant, "you are becoming an old woman even though you are pretending you are younger."

I am sure that a Chilean woman could give more elaborate and complicated examples, if she wanted to disclose the women's secret code. I am just a man, an outsider trying to talk about something I really cannot entirely understand.

Monday finally arrived and I entered for the first time my own office. It wasn't carpeted, but the floor was in good shape. I learned that the degree of an official could be recognized by the floor of his office. When I first worked at the Department, I didn't even have an office, but just a desk and the floor was in very bad shape because they moved the furniture constantly for some reason I never understood. Now I had an office and the wood floor was properly clean and waxed; Felipe had a new grey carpet, and the Secretary of Housing had the sacred red one.

"This will be your new office, Mister Coordinator," said a young man with a cold smile. His last name was Salas and he was the Vice-Coordinator and the senior career official of my section. My position was of the exclusive trust of the Secretary of Housing, it was a political position and I was above the normal scale. The section was composed of five persons in a strictly hierarchical order: first it was me, of course – that felt good – then Salas, as I said; then a man named Jorquera. After those guys – they were the people who knew how to run the office – was an old woman named Cecilia. She was about to retire and never did anything except complain. However, she had an impressive memory and she always knew all there was to be known about the office. She was like an encyclopedia. Her problem was that her seniority made her feel that she didn't have to work for real; she didn't accept orders from her superiors, but just from me, and she did it reluctantly. I had to ask her to do her few tasks as if they were a special favor. She performed them only when she was in the proper mood. For some reason nobody messed with her – I believed she knew some influential people. Therefore, I never asked her to do anything really useful. To my relief she finally retired and I had to give a short

goodbye speech. I could not recall what I said and I wouldn't repeat it if I could. I said only what a boss was supposed to say in those occasions. In the most surprising turn, she cried. The whole office was disconcerted by of these sudden tears. She said she would miss us and that she would go back to some small town in the south. She was single. I don't know if she was a widow or if she never married. Her retirement was condemning her to solitude. For me it was a very emotional and uncomfortable moment. I didn't like that woman and then I pitied her. After she left, the office worked much better and I didn't hire anybody to fill her position.

At the bottom was a young girl called Sandra, who was petite and shy. She was always offering me coffee and I still don't know if she had a crush on me or if she was just a toady.

I was the boss and my job consisted in making sure that everybody else was doing his and her job. The job of my office was to coordinate the resources among the different building projects of the Metropolitan Area.

"Boss," said Sandra after she knocked on my door and I let her in. It was the first time that a young beautiful girl called me boss and it felt damn good. Many people called me boss after that. I have been called even Great Vigilant, Great Treasurer, and Great Master. With time I learned that those names are just vanity, but then I didn't know that yet, so I quietly enjoyed the treatment.

"There is a gentleman who wants to see you, sir," smiled Sandra.

I let the man in and he was my former boss. His office, the Direction of Projects for Maipú District of the Metropolitan Area, happened to be under the

Metropolitan Coordination and I happened to be the guy in charge of that office. I was turned into his boss.

“Congratulations, sir,” said Mister Apablaza, who was now just Jorge Apablaza.

“Thank you,” I said. Until this point I didn’t know about this reversal of roles. After I shook his hand, mine began to shake. I wasn’t afraid, but it was pure adrenaline. It felt good.

I don’t exactly remember what he said. But he wanted me to be sure he had nothing to do with my firing and that he was just obeying superior orders. I have to admit he showed some dignity. He didn’t look afraid; nevertheless, it was not difficult to guess he was. If he were not, why was he in my office in the first place? I don’t remember exactly his words. I was enjoying the fact that I had become his boss. Power is amazing and only hypocrites can deny it. It’s funny that I don’t remember if I believed him. I think it didn’t matter. After he left my office, I asked Sandra for his and my files. My file was lost. I could imagine Astrum Aureum Society behind that. I was on the black list, so my file had to be lost so I could go back into the Government. In Apablaza’s file there was nothing about my firing, of course. That had to be in my own lost forever file. I couldn’t know if Apablaza had indeed something to do with the loss of my previous job or not. I studied his file and I found a reference letter from a politician of the Christian Democratic Party. That party had supported the coup at the first, but it quickly turned against the Dictatorship. I had the weapon to fire my former boss, but I didn’t know if it was fair to fire him.

I stood up and looked at my office. It was clean and the walls were white and naked, except for the official photograph of General Augusto José Ramón Pinochet Ugarte, President of the Republic of Chile. Of course it was mandatory and I would not dare to take it down, even though he wasn't very pretty and it reminded me of the painting in the Officers' Club. I looked at my empty desk and I decided to put a portrait of Cristina on it and some of the pictures my mother took at *Little Union*. I also thought about putting some poetry books on the metallic bookshelves – having wooden bookshelves was for people more important than me. Of course I couldn't put Neruda on those shelves.

But I wasn't really thinking about decoration. I took a piece of paper and I put it in my typewriter – I think this was the only time I really used it – and I wrote a memo:

M E M O R A N D U M

To the Personnel Office

Of the Department of Housing

Of the Republic of Chile

Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

After a careful revision of the file of Jorge Eduardo Apablaza Rivera, I recommend his separation from the public service of the Government of the Republic of Chile. His political affiliation makes him not trust worthy anymore as a public official, even though he doesn't represent any danger to National Security.

Osvaldo Chandía Chacón

Metropolitan Coordinator

Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

I put my signature on it and all the seals that the memo required. They were many: Chilean bureaucracy is unique in the quantity of useless procedures; Americans haven't seen any really stupid bureaucracy, until they confront the bureaucracy of a South American country. I used my intercom and I called Sandra. She wasn't officially my assistant, but she performed that function in fact.

"Yes, sir," she said inside my office. She blushed a little. Probably she wasn't a toady and she actually had a crush on me. At the time, however, I had eyes for Cristina only. Sandra was cute, but she could not compete. Nobody could ever.

"Please take this to Personnel," I asked.

"Yes sir," she said with her face even more red. I wonder what did she like about me. I think it was just that I was an unusually young boss. Salas and Jorquera were older than I was. However, Sandra never had a chance: my heart was already too busy to have affairs. Later I learned that romantic affairs are the hobby of lonely men. I passed into a stage of many affairs, then into a stage of celibacy. That happened in the United States a long time after my time as Metropolitan Coordinator.

Felipe and even Salas – this last one showing a big nerve – congratulated me about my decision of recommending Apablaza's firing. They said that he was a danger for me and that I had made the cleverest move. Rafael – who was the voice of my conscience until he died – told me he never fired anyone and that he wouldn't be able to do something like that.

“I have a grandma’s heart,” was his commentary.

However, he also said that if Felipe said that it was the right thing to do, then it was. Rafael said Felipe was the expert in that world. Maybe they were right, but when I did it I wasn’t being clever, but just vindictive. I don’t know if I regret this or not, maybe I don’t.

It wasn't a year later, I think. I am too bad with dates to remember them properly. I remember I rented a very small apartment in San Antonio Street. I didn't even know that such small apartments even existed. I didn't rent something that small because I was cheap, but because I didn't want it to become a proper home. Abandoning my mother was out of the question then. There Cristina and I had just a bed because nothing else could fit in the little place. Those months were perfect. We stayed together almost every night, to the desperation of our conservative mothers, who were in a powerful alliance.

Finally I collected the guts and I proposed to her. I bought a wonderful ring in a Jewelry shop in Philips Gallery. I went there after work and I realized how complicated it was buying a ring. Philips Gallery was a labyrinth inside a building between Plaza de Armas – the main square of Santiago – and Huérfanos Boulevard. Most of the stores were jeweler's shops and I didn't know which of them to choose. Finally I entered one just because the labyrinth began to seem endless and scary.

"What size ring do you want, sir?" the vendor asked me. He was a small man in his fifties and he had a moustache.

"Well, I don't know," I said, "and I cannot ask her because this is supposed to be a surprise."

"Let me give you an idea," he said. "Take one of her rings and bring it here, we will match the size."

I stole the ring in the small apartment. She stayed there looking for it during the entire morning and called me to my office to mourn her loss. I almost felt guilty.

After work I went to the jewelry store with my booty. The man put it in a cone with marks. I don't remember the number. He showed me four rings that looked exactly like the rings in the movies, or that was what I thought. I bought the most expensive. His explanations about the quality and the white gold were very detailed, but I just thought that the ring looked good and I wanted to spend a good amount of money as a way of demonstrating my love. That was so stupid! But I thought it was romantic.

That night however, we couldn't meet at the small apartment for some reason I cannot recall, it was probably because she couldn't spend every night in the apartment with me in order to please her mother just a little. I had to wait until Saturday and Saturdays were the days when we used to reunite at her home.

"I found your ring," I said. "It was in my pocket."

"Where do you have it?" she asked.

"In the pocket of my jacket," I said.

She went to the lobby and a scream told me that she found her new ring.

"What was that?" asked her mother.

"She found a surprise," I said.

"Look at this!" said Cristina showing the ring on her finger to her mother and my mother, who was also there in the dining room. Both moms screamed at the same time and they scared me. María came from the kitchen and she also had to check the ring. Fortunately she didn't scream, but she just put her hand on her mouth. There were too many screams for one day.

"I will wear a black dress!" said Cristina. "I want Osvaldo to wear a white suit."

"Over my dead body," said her mother.

"Just kidding, Mom," said Cristina, but if I knew her, she really planned to wear a black dress.

Felipe arrived a little late, as every Saturday. This time, however, Cristina's mother waited for him to serve the dinner.

"Why are you not dining already?" asked Felipe. And he received a diamond in his face as an answer.

That night we all stayed up late and Felipe and I didn't have our conversation about the secrets of the Astrum Aureum. I think I received my master's robe a week after. At the time it was almost as important as my proposal. They gave it to me a little sooner because Cristina already had already that rank and she couldn't marry a simple official of *Stonehenge*. Felipe just gave me the robe after the meeting had begun and I received just the applause of the dear brothers. At the banquet the brothers congratulated me, and that was the moment when I realized that they didn't care and were just being polite.

I always wondered why none of them became my friend. Miguel and I shared the car until I left the country. Pato moved to an even bigger house and he wasn't on the route of our driver anymore. I used to think it was because of the curfew, but in the United States it was the same. We met only at *Stonehenge* and the banquets after the rituals. There was no law or rule about that, and the order actually encouraged friendship among the members, but it just didn't happen. In the United States I

befriended the right people, but there was no real comradeship. I never found the explanation for this.

The next week we celebrated and I invited Rafael. We went to a Chinese restaurant called *The Blue Danube*¹⁵. I never understood why a Chinese Restaurant had that name.

“I am not the best person to talk about marriage,” said Rafael, “but when I see this girl and her big green eyes, I see sincerity and that is really difficult to find in a girl these days. When I see the brown eyes of my friend, I think I rather prefer hers.” Everybody laughed at this. “But I also see sincerity, or at least all the sincerity that is possible.” They continued laughing, but I read his message and his approval of my acts. Rafael’s opinion was really important for me. I believe that Rafael was the reason I finally didn’t lost myself; well, one of the reasons. “You never have to forget who you are, but that, kids, can never be an obstacle to becoming what you can be,” he finished.

“What kind of philosophy do you teach, professor?” This was the first time Felipe met Rafael. Felipe thought that the secret arcana of the Astrum Aureum were some kind of valid philosophy, and he thought he could find some affinities between him and Rafael. Nothing could be more mistaken.

“None,” said Rafael. “I stopped teaching. I am not professor anymore. I am just a book seller.”

¹⁵ The reason is that the restaurant had that name before becoming a Chinese restaurant and the new owner never changed it. The place is still in business in Santiago and it is a very well known place. Obviously Osvaldo didn’t now about this particular. The story is now on the menu.

"It was totally unfair that the government closed the Philosophy Major," said Felipe.

"Yes it was, sir, it was," Rafael didn't want to show any emotion.

"Please don't call me, sir!" said Felipe.

Rafael looked at him. I thought Felipe intimidated him, but now I understand that he wanted to maintain the distance between them. They were enemies and he was at that table just because of me and maybe because of Cristina. For him, Felipe represented everything he hated.

"Ok, Felipe," he finally said, "why not. Finally we are just men and as men we are equals."

"Pardon me?" asked Felipe. 'Equality' was a controversial word for him.

"I taught Political Philosophy from Machiavelli to the Frankfurt School," answered Rafael. "I also taught Marx."

Silence was produced at the table.

"Marx was part of the syllabus of all Philosophy Schools in Europe and even in the United States," continued Rafael. "People from the law major, anthropology, sociology, and even students of theology studied Marx. I had plenty of work."

"Please don't talk about politics at the table," said Cristina's mother. The rest of us were silent.

"Well," answered Felipe, "the United States and Europe are developed societies, but here we are not prepared for that kind of knowledge. We just saw what happened."

“With all due respect, sir,” said Rafael, “that was not a consequence of knowledge, but of our basic human nature, which is dangerous without wisdom.”

Rafael was doing his best effort to be subtle as a favor to me.

“There is some knowledge that is not for everyone,” said Felipe. “Imagine everyone knowing how to build an atomic bomb!”

“Actually,” said Rafael, “almost any student of physics could figure how to build it. Fortunately they don’t have the means to make heavy water or plutonium.”

“What if there was a knowledge that could make everybody free to make his or her will?” asked Felipe.

“There are many concepts of freedom and some thinkers thought that real freedom is impossible, like Schopenhauer. But I don’t see the point of thinking about some metaphysic definition of freedom. Not when we don’t have the only concrete form of freedom: political freedom.” Rafael was looking into Felipe’s eyes. This was almost an open provocation.

Felipe looked at him and I didn’t know if he didn’t understand what he had implied. I believe he just ignored his last critique to the Dictatorship. Felipe was a functionary of the government, but he wasn’t the normal partisan of Pinochet. For him Pinochet was just a tool, and ultimately just a profane.

“What about guilt?” Felipe asked. He returned to the abstract discussion quickly.

Rafael took a moment to answer. I could guess he was wondering how Felipe could think in those abstract ways with such a concrete problem before his nose.

“That’s a part of freedom too, Felipe.” I he didn’t start a fight only because of Cristina and me. “However, most people do all right and moral dilemmas are really rare. I think they present mostly to powerful men, and powerful men are not the majority of the people.”

“Imagine,” said Felipe, “that everyone was free to do whatever they want. That could destroy the whole humanity!”

“That was what Hobbes said,” said Rafael, “*the man is the wolf of the man.*”

The waiter brought us the food. I didn’t know his name. I wondered what happened to all the people out of their jobs because of the Dictatorship. Those who became waiters, cab drivers or something like that. Did they found other jobs? Did the Dictatorship kill them? Were they exiled to other countries? After a while, I learned that all those questions had an affirmative answer.

The small cold war between Felipe and Rafael was just a reflex of the contradictions of Chilean society. Nevertheless, I thought I had already found the balance of life. That was the supposed to be the mission of Astrum Aureum Society. As more people found their balance, the world would be a better place. Nevertheless, nobody could do anything for anybody. It was a personal mission. This was the worst mistake of the Astrum Aureum’s doctrine: they never understood that no man is an island.

The man favored by fortune usually believes that it is because of his own merit, as the man who is disfavored by it blames other people. I was in the first case and I had the biggest ego in the whole universe. I had an easy job that was destined to guys like me: guys with connections and mediocre skills. I just had to revise some

memos and the numbers, but Jorquera and Salas were the ones who really did the job. I was planning to continue my education, as Felipe not only suggested but also insisted. He wanted me in the private sector, where people really made money. At the time, however, I was doing well and I'd never made that kind of money before. It was nothing compared with the money I made later, and I never made *real* money.

I don't like myself at that moment. I was vain and conceited. The only thing I can esteem about myself was my loyalty. The expression of my loyalty was that I remained a friend to Rafael, and of course, the other good thing about myself was Cristina. I suspect that my illness is an expression of my nostalgia for her. I wasn't really a heavy smoker; I smoked just five cigarettes a day. If I were a believer, I would believe that I am going back to her.

"Mister Coordinator," was the way in which Rafael saluted me every time I went to his place. He wasn't mocking me, but there was something annoying about the treatment.

"Please, don't call me that," I used to say.

"There was a story," he told more than once. "A famous Zen master had a friend who was great general. One day the great general paid a visit to his old friend. 'Tell the abbot,' said the general to a young monk, 'that the great general is here.' The young monk went to see the master and then he came back saying: 'the master says that he doesn't know any great general.' 'Sorry,' said the general after a minute, 'tell my old friend that his old friend is here for a visit.' The monk went in again and then he invited the general into the temple."

For a reason I could not understand, that history haunted me. Maybe deeply in my heart I already knew I was just a mediocre with connections. After I had to leave Chile, I committed myself again to excellence in whatever I did. As the Metropolitan Coordinator, I had lost that commitment. I became spoiled, bourgeois, and lazy. Why pursue excellence if that was not the way to anything really valuable?

Rafael was never judgmental. He always understood that I did what I had to do and he never gave me harsh words. He even controlled himself in front of Felipe, but in private he was direct when he told me what he thought.

“Felipe is a good man,” he said, “but he is blinded by privilege. He really believes that all that he has is because of his merit, his intelligence, and the magic of that society with the colorful name in Latin. Those men need a mystic experience and a huge intellect to understand that life is mostly unfair. They live in a bubble. There is an inherent stupidity in the man who has not really fought for what he has; it takes the shape of optimism and they are even nice men. But their naivety is dangerous for themselves and for the whole society. They are the people that think that poor people are poor because they are lazy and even that sick people are sick because they deserve it. Beware of those men, my friend, beware.”

I also believed the universe had an order and life was fair in an occult manner. Because of the manuals of my society with the colorful name – as Rafael used to call it – I even believed I knew the secret of that occult manner. However I never told him this. Maybe it was because I didn’t actually believe what I believed I knew; maybe because I knew that I was not prepared for a debate with a philosophy professor, or maybe just because I wanted to keep his friendship. I never told him

about my opinions of those days, not even in my letters when I was already in the United States and thinking otherwise. I invited him several times to my new home in America, but he never wanted to come, except for the time we met in Miami. But then we were in a very different mood. I wish I could have visited him in Chile before his death, but he died before I was able to make a safe return and before they sent me to Chile on executive commissions. Immediately after the Dictatorship was over, somebody happened to remember that I was Chilean and spoke Spanish.

The Perfect Balance of Life was broken one Saturday, the day when the family was reunited. On Sundays we were separated between Catholics and members of the society.

It's funny how even some routines of arguments are also a proof of love. Cristina the mother continued arguing with her daughter about her way of sitting and she continued provoking her. My mother became a kind of mediator between the two Cristinas and the scene was like those scenes in the sitcoms that are repeated every week and people laugh anyway. This is the first time I think about that. In my life I found that people usually get tired of routines and they are anxious for adventure, passions, danger or whatever they imagine more interesting. But happiness is precisely in routine, precisely in the predictability of the everyday dynamics of love. I guess the only way to learn that is the difficult way. This means losing that whole familiarity.

Felipe being fashionably late and his wife complaining about it were also parts of the ritual. That day, however, Felipe broke the natural rhythm by making an

out of the program phone call. Even the sound of the phone broke the conversation and produced a strange silence.

“The phone,” said my mother. It was an obvious remark and also the narration of something extraordinary.

The phone rang several times before María answered it. She was looking at the rest of us while she was talking.

“Yes, sir... yes, sir... yes, sir... do you want to talk to her? Ok, sir, I will tell her, good bye sir.” María finally hung and look at us confused.

“Well?” had to say Cristina the mother.

“The master says that he will bring a guest and he asks for you to wait for him this time,” said María. “We have food enough, madam.”

Cristina wasn't a woman who liked changes. However this time she did not protest.

“Are you sure that there is only one guest, María?”

“That was what the master said, Madam.”

Then there was silence. It was only a minute of silence or even less. Maybe it was the time we used to adjust to this whole new reality of having someone who was not a member of our family – Cristina and I were not married yet, but that was perceived just as a formality. There is also the possibility that I am exaggerating and that the moment passed just unnoticed, like any other moment without any importance. Memory is tricky.

We went to the living room. The living room of that house was an immaculate place and it was used as an exhibition room for Cristina's new acquisitions at the

flea market, like that three feet tall sculpture of The Three Graces in bronze. It seemed that nobody ever went there. The routine was going from the lobby to the dining room and then sometimes to the little bar, which was a small room decorated with a counter and one of those things that people use to hang the glasses above it. But even going there was unnecessary. We used to have our drinks in the dining room. The bar room was a whim of Felipe, and, if I believe Cristina the mother, it was just after he bought the furniture when he realized that the dining room was more comfortable to drink in and he abandoned his bar room, except for some rare occasions.

The new sculpture was the topic of the conversation. It was new to the house, but it was in fact very old.

“They look like three lesbians to me,” said Cristina to her mother. Actually the grace on the left was touching the right breast of the one in the center and their hug was delicately ambiguous. I smiled, but I didn’t say anything.

“Cristina!” said her mother. “This sculpture is the idea of harmony rescued from the ancient Greeks, this is a neoclassic piece probably from the nineteenth century.”

Cristina dropped herself on a couch and her legs were plenty visible. It didn’t matter that I had already seen her naked many times, she looked especially sensual in that loose way.

“Greeks were so gay!” she laughed.

“No they were not!” said her mother.

“Yes they were, Mom. Have you ever read the *Symposium* or Sappho’s poetry?”

The mother just ignored her daughter’s last remark.

“This is a treasure I found in the Flea Market,” she began.

“It is just queer!” said the daughter.

“Enough,” said the mother, and something in her voice made her daughter behave.

“It is wonderful sculpture!” said my mom trying to help.

Then I put my hand on my breast imitating the gesture of the sculpture and my mother and my fiancée just couldn’t stop laughing. Cristina’s mother looked at us, and she finally said:

“You fucking bastards!”

That kind of language was very unusual in her and we suddenly stopped laughing.

“Especially you, Meme,” Cristina the mother began to laugh. “Why didn’t you tell me that these were just three lesbians?”

“I didn’t realize that until now that your child said it, Cristina!” Then the laughing was almost unstoppable.

We heard Felipe’s car and he opened the door with his key.

“Please come in,” said Felipe to his guest.

We all went to the lobby and there was Felipe with the man, that man.

“Hello everybody,” he said. “Let me introduce you to Esteban Saavedra, he is a high ranking official of the Government.”

Of course I will never forget his face. He was the guy who beat the hell out of me at the Officers' Club.

"This is my future son in law," said Felipe after introducing the women.

"Nice to meet you," said Esteban. Believe it or not, I had to shake hands with that man. I still feel nausea when I remember about it. I think it was worse than the beating.

"Have we met before?" asked Esteban.

"I don't think so," I lied.

"Osvaldo is the Metropolitan Coordinator of the Department of Housing," said Felipe. It didn't seem to impress Esteban.

We sat at the table and we ate. Esteban told us that DINA would be replaced by another intelligence organization called CNI. He would be very high at that organization and he wanted the cooperation of all the civilian officials of the Dictatorship – of course, he didn't use that word. Felipe and I were two of those. I don't remember what Felipe said. I remember that he looked relaxed. He had no idea who the man he was talking to was.

"I know that many of the civilian officials are not aware of the danger that Communism implies," said Esteban, "but they are everywhere!"

"I work at a very technical office, Esteban, and I swear that if I see a Commie I will tell the authorities right away," said Felipe.

"Commies," repeated Cristina, "I guess that nobody is a Commie anymore, I have some classmates..."

"If you know a Communist, please let your father know, Miss," said Esteban with a smile. Cristina used to make everybody smile, even that monster.

"Don't talk again to that psychopath," I said at her ear. She just looked at me and smiled. Then she understood I was talking seriously. Fortunately, she obeyed. I cannot imagine my face. Cristina wasn't precisely obedient.

After the dessert and after talking much more nonsense about an alleged communist conspiracy, Esteban finally left. When he said goodbye he looked at me again.

"Are you sure that we haven't met before?" he asked.

"Yes I am," I lied again.

Immediately after he was gone, I told the truth.

"I had met that man before," I said.

Felipe's face turned white.

"Why did you lie," he asked. I'm sure he had a pretty good idea about the reasons for my lying.

I told him about the beating at the Officers' Club. Felipe's face turned even paler.

"You have to leave the country as soon as possible!" he said.

"But what about our wedding!" Cristina replied.

"What's happening here? Who was that man!" asked her mother.

"Honey," said Felipe to his daughter, "you will marry abroad, but no wedding will be celebrated in Chile."

"Why?" asked my fiancée.

“Yes, why?” asked her mother. “What’s happening in this country?”

“You will report ill on Monday,” Felipe told me, “and you will stay here tonight until Wednesday. After that, you will be placed on the first plane to the United States.”

“I want some answers here,” said the woman who never became my mother in law.

“Do you speak English?” Felipe asked me, completely ignoring his wife.

“No, I don’t,” I said.

“You will have English lessons before you start your new Master’s Degree in the United States,” explained Felipe. “I can get you a fellowship using the brotherhood’s influences.”

“Did Osvaldo commit a crime?” asked Cristina, the daughter.

“He was just at the wrong place at the wrong moment,” answered Felipe.

“I want to marry him!” said Cristina.

“In America, honey, not here,” said Felipe, “and please practice your English too.”

“I want answers, Felipe!” said Cristina the mother again. “What brotherhood are you talking about?”

“No, honey,” he told her, “You don’t want any answer. What you want to do is to go to your church every Sunday and then go to the flea market. You want to be on the board of those things you direct and doing your charities. You don’t want the answers because you won’t know what to do with the answers. Just remember that

things that you take for granted are not rights, but privileges, and it's difficult to keep those privileges."

"I am your wife," said Cristina, "not a little girl. What's happening here, Felipe?" It was the only time I heard Cristina yelling.

"Trust me, Cristina," Felipe looked into her eyes, "you just don't want to know."

I became one of the thousands "lefties" helped by powerful men in the Dictatorship.

"He may be a Commie," they used to say, "but he is first my friend – or my relative – and a person from a good family – or from my family." I've heard the story before, many times.

"It was a total misunderstanding," was the other excuse, as it was the truth in my own case. Many people without the proper friends were tortured or murdered because of those misunderstandings. The Dictatorship denied these kinds of things were happening. After the return of democracy, Pinochet admitted his personnel might have committed "excesses." I saw him on TV at home in Virginia. I was trying to figure out what to think, how to feel, and trying to make sense. A bronze ashtray – that looked the same as the one that was on the table in Cristina's lobby – "accidentally" destroyed the screen of the TV. Fortunately I was alone. I threw it into garbage and I went immediately to buy another one. I found the very same model.

"We have a better model now, sir," told me the vendor, but I didn't want anybody to think I had finally lost it.

"I want this one, please" I insisted.

"The new model is better, bigger, and cheaper," he insisted at this time.

"The thing is I built a piece of furniture with the precise space for this model," I explained.

"Why did you do that?" he asked. "Sorry, sir," he said. "That's not my business."

I think this guy in a blue polo shirt and khakis thought I was eccentric, but I didn't care. The guy didn't even know who I was.

"Ok, sir," he said. "Have a good night."

I walked among the electronics to the register and then I came back to install my new TV. It looked exactly the same, but my living room had now the enormous cardboard box, the Styrofoam, the plastic bags, and the extra wires. Maria, the cleaning lady was coming next morning, therefore I threw it all out to avoid her discovering me.

"You bought a new TV?" she asked me just before I went to work. I wonder how she knew.

"Yes, I did," I admitted. "Accidentally I broke the old one yesterday."

"You should buy the new model, then," she told me and I felt stupid.

I have to admit many of those powerful men risked their positions and maybe even their lives by helping people like me. However, these generous men never questioned the policies, or the killings in general. They just put friendship, social status, or whatever they were thinking about, above the interest of a

government that was only a tool to protect their own interests. Nothing like common wealth was in jeopardy, or even in the minds of men like Felipe. It didn't matter that the Dictatorship was killing people of lower classes or other neighborhoods. A few decades later, I found that even Esteban helped Alberto Hernández, a folk musician. He happened to like his music. He was a very famous man who used to sing about the poverty of the peasants. Of course that became inconvenient under a government that wanted to stop poverty, even if that meant killing poor people. For a reason I simply cannot understand, Esteban liked the music of Hernández and he decided that he was better alive. Hernández now still visits the guy in prison and they became friends. He taught Esteban how to play the guitar and he composed a song. Most of the people in the Chilean music world believed Hernández was doing wrong, because the same Esteban ordered or was somehow involved in the killing, torture, or exile of many other musicians, poets, and artists like the emblematic Víctor Jara. Nevertheless, that's not for me to judge. I was no better than Hernandez was: I only thought in saving my own skin.

In order to finally realize that they were killing innocent people, I had to become one of the possible victims. I remembered Jaime Correa Tapia and only that evening at Felipe's, I regretted I didn't understand everything that night on the streets: A guilty man is never arrested in the middle of the night and in secret. Learning this was absolutely logical and easy; I wonder how is it I didn't realize that fact at that precise moment. I guess I had to fool myself in order to keep going; the mind is strange. I wondered where he was and I still wonder where he is. I also realized that first the DINA and then the CNI were untouchable and even a high

official like Felipe was powerless before them. Only then I learned what impunity meant. Under a dictatorship things don't have to make any sense, so they don't.

##

Here is where the copybook of the Great Master abruptly ended.

FURTHER INQUIRIES

I should notice Norman didn't look as enthusiastic as before, and that my presence seemed to be a burden.

"Did you receive my email?" I asked after a silence of almost thirty seconds – an eternity for a silence. I had sent him my first draft of this novel.

"Yes, I did," answered Norman and then another eternal silence came. In my own naivety, I was worried about issues like voice, style, and credibility. I thought Norman didn't like my work. I already felt a little like a thief, because of the theme and the time period. I still thought that Roberto Brodsky was a better choice than myself. As a matter of fact, I was thinking about asking him to look at my work. I was not a journalist as he was and I felt a little insecure. I think that was the reason why I didn't see what was happening.

"Didn't you like it?" This is the most anxious question that a writer can ask.

We were alone in his living room. Brenda was out with his mother who was visiting from California. I was alone with a silent man and there is nothing more uncomfortable than being alone with a silent man.

"Please, don't misunderstand me," he finally said, "I like your prose, and I think you did a wonderful job with my father's memoir," he paused again for a million years. "But this is supposed to be my father and there is a man I've never met before! It's so weird!"

I looked at him and I believed that I understood him. I remember my professors when I read their books. It was like knowing them in a very intimate dimension. A classmate told me that she just didn't read her professor's works.

Nevertheless, I was a writer or at least a wannabe writer and I was not used to having any intimacy. I believed Norman felt like my wife when she read my work, and I believed it was just a case of too much information.

“Did you read the whole thing?” I asked.

“No, man, sorry.”

“I understand, but there is not an ending, and I thought that you could fill in what is missing, Norman.”

“Arturo,” he looked at me, “you know more about my father than I knew in my whole life! You are the one who can fill my lacunas about him, but I don’t want to know. I want to have my dad’s memory as it was, and I don’t want to think about him like this Henry Miller guy!”

Only then I remembered that Norman was just a little older than a teenager, despite his overachieved life. Besides, and despite his illusion, he was not Chilean but an all American man, and he could neither think like a South American nor imagine that context.

“Wait a minute,” he said suddenly. He went somewhere else in the house and brought an envelope with my name. I recognized Osvaldo’s awful calligraphy. “He left this for you for when you came for answers.”

I opened the envelope and there was a cashier check for ten thousand dollars and a letter. I started to read the letter at loud.

“Dear Arturo,” began the letter, “if you are in front of my son, ask him if he wants you to read this for him.” I waited for his answer.

Norman stood up and began to walk around the room; he looked through the window and then at his watch.

"They are about to come," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"Brenda, my mom, and Gabriela are out." He looked a little more through the window and he finally sat down again. "Ok, go on!"

"I would like to become your friend. Of course that was impossible, because I had an appointment with death. It was a form of lung disease and it was very debilitating. The doctor said that I needed a lung transplant. But, my friend, what was the point of grasping at a miserable life? The only future possible was the painful existence of an addict to painkillers and the anxious waiting for the death of a young healthy man with a compatible organ. I do not regret my life, and except for the loss of Cristina, I had a life better than the one I deserved. It was the time for retiring with dignity. But there was a task to do before. I had to tell about the Astrum Aureum in Chile, about the whole manipulation and about the things I witnessed. I wrote everything with all my heart. Of course my Cristina came back and she became the center of my writing. I swear that I tried to tell the facts that made her die. But I couldn't. I tried to write about it several nights. I was fighting to fill the empty pages of the copybook I bought to write my story, but it was impossible. The night before I met you, I made the last attempt to write the ending. It was as impossible as it

was before. I need to apologize to you for leaving you an unfinished story. It was not just a bad coincidence that I died just after meeting you. It was that I felt I did the best I could, and it was time to let it go. If you really want to know the end of the story, please contact this person:" there was a familiar name and an address in Chile, "but hurry up. She is old."

"That is so my dad!" interrupted Norman. I was kind of aware of his suicide when he quoted Frida Khalo in his note. I didn't know if Norman shared my awareness and that was not the moment to ask.

The front door opened and I knew that Norman didn't want me to continue my reading. Brenda came with Gabriela in her arms.

"Hello, Arturo!" she said enthusiastically and Gabriela said something nice in her own baby's language. Of course she was bigger than the last time I saw her. "Did you finish with the translation of my father in law?"

"I finished the translation and the adaptation," I answered, "but I still have some lacunas."

"When can I read it?" asked Brenda. I looked at Norman.

"Soon," he said. Only then I suspected that he meant never.

Then a blonde entered in the house. She looked very young but she had to be older, because Norman called her "Mom". Women are not aging anymore. I had some photos of Cristina, and for a moment, I thought that this woman was she. Fortunately I had just read that Cristina was dead.

“You are the writer!” she said to me without saying hello. “I am Caroline.” She offered me her hand and I shook it. “And I am the ex wife of your new hero.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said while I was discovering that Osvaldo was always in love with Cristina. He even found her doppelganger and married her. Though this woman was pretty – and she was near to my age – the sensation was creepy.

“I just want to say that I am not a typical ex-wife and I was a friend to Osvaldo. If I wasn’t in his funeral, it was because nobody told me that he was dying.” She looked at her son, clearly talking to him.

“It was his will,” said Norman. “He didn’t want any crying or any mourning around him. I think he told me only because he needed my help.”

“That was so him!” said Caroline.

“Yes, it was,” agreed Brenda. “None of us really got to know him.” She went upstairs with her daughter.

Caroline sat in the couch where Norman was sitting before.

“I think that my divorce was a mistake...” Caroline began. Some people become confessional when they know they are in front of a writer.

“Ok, enough,” said Norman. He smiled, but I knew he was not happy.

“I have to go now,” I said. It wasn’t true, but I thought I had provoked enough distress for a day.

“Wait a minute,” said Caroline. She looked into her purse and she gave me a business card. “Please call me tomorrow I would love talking to you.”

I thanked her and I almost had to escape from there.

"I don't want to throw you out of my house, Arturo. But as you could see, my father died in too much mystery and he is fascinating my mom and my wife," Norman told me outside his house. "I need to close all this and keep going."

"I understand," I believed I did, but I did not.

He was wearing a polo shirt and I could see the mark of the Astrum Aureum on his arm.

"You are in!" I was surprised.

He covered the tattoo with his hand for a second, but then he realized that I knew everything about the society.

"Well, I am, yes," he said.

"And what do you think about it?"

Norman looked down at the ground.

"I think my father was wrong about this particular," he said. "The Astrum Aureum Society can do a lot for the progress of humanity; for me it has been quite a revelation!"

I thought it was a joke, but then I realized that he was talking seriously.

"What do you think about your father's book?"

"My father didn't write any book, Arturo." He looked at me. "It's your book and it is just a novel, do you remember?"

"Of course this book is now pure fiction," I answered. "I changed too many things to call it a memoir."

I think that was the end of my friendship with Norman. I haven't seen him again until now.

At home I called Chile by Skype. The letter also included a phone number.

"Hello," I said in Spanish, "Is Mrs. Cristina Aguirre at home?"

"Yes she is," answered a voice. "Who is calling?"

"My name is Arturo Ruiz Ortega and I am a writer," I said.

"Oh a writer!" said the voice. "Are you famous?"

"Sort of," I said. My better-known pieces were for TV, but people didn't know the name of the scriptwriter. My book had decent sales, but I guessed that the maid wasn't a fan of reading. I knew she was a maid by the way she spoke.

"I will tell madam to come, please wait."

I waited a little bit in front of my computer and then I heard the voice of what I believed it was a younger woman.

"Hello," she said.

"Are you Cristina Aguirre?" I asked because her juvenile voice made me doubt her identity.

"Yes, this is Cristina Aguirre speaking, who do I have the pleasure to talk to?"

"I am Arturo Ruiz Ortega, a writer, and I am working on the biography of Osvaldo Chandía."

"Good Lord!" The woman seemed happy. "How is that ungrateful boy doing? I had no news about him from about a year ago! He used to write me a letter every month."

I realized that I was in the most uncomfortable position.

"I am very sorry," I began but didn't have to finish. Cristina understood immediately because I heard a sobbing and then I heard her calling her maid by her name: Rosa.

I waited a while at the computer.

"I am very sorry, sir, but Madam doesn't feel ok," said Rosa. "Please leave me your phone number and Mrs. Cristina will call you as soon as possible."

I gave her the number and I told her that I was calling from the United States.

"Are you calling from that far!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, I am."

My phone rang during dinner. Chileans use to dine at eight or nine o'clock, but Leonor and I adopted the American dining time. It was six o'clock when Cristina called.

"Sorry, I left you in that abrupt manner, Mr. Ruiz," Cristina apologized.

"Don't worry, I understand, Mrs. Cristina."

"Please, just Cristina," she said. "I'm old enough so I don't need anybody to remind it for me."

"In that case it's just Arturo," I replied.

"At my age – and I am 93 – I'm used to people dying," she said. "But the death of a young one like Osvaldo is always a tragedy. How did he die?"

"Lung cancer," I thought it was better not to tell her the details. Besides, I didn't even know the name of his disease.

"Poor boy!" she said regretfully. Osvaldo was in his sixties, but he was just a kid compared with this woman.

"I had the fortune of meeting him just before," I said. "He mentioned your name."

"I will be glad to tell you whatever you want!" she interrupted.

"I will travel as soon as possible and I will contact you again," I proposed.

We said goodbye and I returned to my food, but Leonor was staring at me.

"Why didn't you tell me that you will travel to Chile?" She was a little mad at me.

"Because I didn't know I will, honey."

"What are you going there for?" Leonor knew perfectly what I was going for. She was just a little bit perplexed with the suddenness of the whole decision.

"I have to interview this woman about Osvaldo's last years in Chile."

"Couldn't you wait for me to make the arrangements and fly with you?"

"No, I cannot."

"Excuse me," said my wife, "but you are a writer and you are not supposed to have emergencies."

"This interview has to be made as soon as possible, Leo, this woman in 93. Osvaldo just gave me the money to cover it."

"I thought he was dead," said Leonor.

"He left everything prepared before dying."

Leonor kept quiet for a while. I understood she was not mad at me any more.

"Osvaldo's story is revealing," she said, "almost incredible."

"Incredible is not good for a book, Leo. Reality can be incredible, but literature cannot."

“You better buy the tickets online right away,” Leonor was right. I went to the computer and I reserved a flight for three days later. It was the best I could get.

The next day I called Caroline in the morning and we agreed to have lunch together. I was nervous because she was a very beautiful woman and I felt as if I was doing something wrong meeting with her alone. I wish we could have lunch at some outdoor café, but it was the beginning of August and I am not good with Washington’s heat. Being with her inside a restaurant seemed absurdly sinful for me. We finally agreed to meet at the Indian Café in Tenleytown.

I was sitting at the table in front of the window, looking at Wisconsin Avenue ten minutes early. I had a recorder and a Moleskin red notebook with plain paper. My small digital recorder made me feel like a spy. To avoid that feeling, I left it plainly visible on the table. As a fiction writer, I was not a person used to interviewing other people or taking notes about what they had to say. I wanted to believe I was nervous because I was I used to being god for my characters and this situation was almost new. Then I remembered that I had some experience in interviews. It was from the time I was the scriptwriter for some low budget documentary films in Chile – all Chilean films are low budget. In those times, we mostly put the camera in front of a person and we let him or her talk. I didn’t have any camera this time, but I had my recorder instead. I have to confess that there is nothing difficult in doing any interview, but this woman had the ability of making me nervous. I saw her coming and she waved to me from outside. I was sitting at the window, so I was plainly visible. She ran a little bit until she got to the door and then she shook my hand and sat down. The absolutely bald Indian waiter gave us the

menu. We ordered the lunch special as I recommended – I was a regular at that restaurant. I preferred the Masala Art, which was near, but the buffet system wasn't good for a deep talk.

"How is the book going?" she asked.

"Well, strictly speaking it is a novel now," I explained, "there are too many changes to present it as a nonfiction."

"But you're going to travel to Chile to find what really happened," she said.

"Aren't you cheating?"

"I guess I am, Caroline, but those were the rules that Osvaldo gave me."

"He gave you a complete book and you will receive all the credit," she laughed.

"He didn't gave me a book," I explained, "but just a story and there is little problem with that story."

"What problem?"

"Osvaldo didn't write an ending." The waiter brought us a bottle of Chilean wine and he poured the glasses for us. I ordered it because wine is good to make people talk. I ordered Chilean, because I thought she could not reject the wine if it was from my homeland. "I could finish the story using my imagination," I continued, "but I suspect that reality is even more interesting."

"I see," said Caroline and she sipped her glass of wine. "I don't know if what I have to say has any relevance to your story. Norman told me that the novel would be about things that happened in Chile. I was never in Chile. I wanted to go, but Osvaldo didn't want to. He said that there was too much pain there for him. He almost didn't

have any Chilean friends when I met him. His friends were American, Asian, or Latino from other countries. He avoided Chilean people as if they were from an enemy land. 'Chileans bring me bad memories,' was his explanation."

Fortunately he didn't have that problem anymore when I met him.

Caroline was much younger than Osvaldo. It was obvious that Osvaldo married her because of her amazing resemblance to Cristina. I didn't know how much she knew about this particular. I wanted to know how they met each other and I didn't know how to ask without being rude. The interviews I did before were not about such delicate subjects, and I was not as involved in the story as I was then. Fortunately she just began to talk without any help.

"In 1984 I was an intern at the International Trade Administration and he was my boss," she stopped for a moment. "I mean, he was not my boss but the boss of the boss of my boss, if you understand me. I was in a meeting basically serving coffee and carrying papers for the big guys and suddenly I noticed that he was staring at me. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'but you look like someone I met long time ago.' I thought that it was the oldest line I've ever heard," continued Caroline, "but he never looked at me after that. I dreamed with his sight one night. I don't remember the exact dream, but it was as if those eyes were telling me the saddest and most beautiful story in silence. When I woke up I could not recall the story, but I decided it was true. I tried to know something about Osvaldo and I found that he was single and that he had a reputation of being a womanizer. But it happened to be just a prejudice, you may know, the Latino thing."

I smiled. That was a good prejudice for a single man. The Latin lover was a myth that many Latinos used in their favor.

“I managed to know that he used to dine every night at the same restaurant alone.” Caroline smiled while she was talking and her eyes turned brighter. She looked gorgeous. “I followed him there. It was a small Italian restaurant with big windows and a few tables. It was near the office and he happened to know the people who worked there. They spoke Spanish.

“I didn’t enter the first time, but he saw me from inside and smiled to me,” she continued. “I gave him a smile back and I walked as if I was going somewhere else. A week after, I went back and there he was again. This time he was with a woman and I admit I felt jealous – I never knew who that woman was. Maybe he was a womanizer before, but I know he was faithful to me. He saw me and smiled again, but I acted as if I didn’t see him. Finally a week after, I entered the restaurant and there was he eating. He was alone this time.”

The waiter brought the food. I was hungry. Caroline didn’t seem hungry but talkative.

“I said hello,” said Caroline and her voice sounded tenderer. “He asked me if I liked pasta and he told me that there they served a very good cannelloni. I didn’t eat pasta because I didn’t want to be fat, but I said I would take his recommendation and then I went to a table and sat alone. It wasn’t good to be seen dining with a man that could be my father and who was my boss!”

Caroline suddenly seemed to notice her food and began to eat.

“What did you do?”

“I was pretty,” she said and she still was. “I was used to men chasing me but this guy just hadn’t approached me. My internship finished a week later and they offered me a job there. I refused it. Instead I accepted less money in Homeland Security because I didn’t want Osvaldo to be my boss. My best friend said that I was stupid and she was probably right. Her name is Kate and we still remain best friends. She is from San Francisco...”

Her digression was enormous. Her eyes began to look shinier and she almost cried. Caroline told me the whole story of this Kate. She was avoiding something painful. I didn’t want to know about that woman in San Francisco, but I had to learn about her kids, her husband, and her new car. I was counting with the editor’s cutting off that part of the interview, as if I was doing a documentary film again. A director told me once that letting people talk about what they want to say made them more open about the subject we wanted to know, so I let her go.

“Sorry,” she said.

“It’s alright,” I smiled.

“I loved that bastard!” she said and I didn’t say anything. “I came back to that restaurant and I found him alone. I asked to sit at his table and he was about to say no, but then I told him that I wasn’t working at his office anymore. ‘You have to understand,’ he apologized, ‘but I had to keep a distance with the people at the office. However, I’m glad you are not working there anymore!’ He really changed for me that night. He began to tell jokes and to talk about everything. Only then I noticed his accent. We started dating and we kept dating for a year. One day he took me to Vegas and we just married there. It was a little bit disappointing. You know, I

was a romantic who wanted the white dress, the maids of honor and all that stuff. Later I understood he took me to Vegas and married me that way because he didn't want any ceremony. We never went to Vegas again and he was not a gambler. I have to admit that he made me happy for a while."

We already finished eating and I ordered a coffee. She ordered tea. I had to ask the obvious question, but Caroline seemed too emotional. Fortunately I didn't have to ask. She was in some confessional mood. It is funny how Americans go from privacy lovers to exhibitionistic confessions. I learned that after certain intimacy, Americans are unstoppable talkers.

"You want to know why we got divorced, don't you?" she intelligently asked and I just nodded. "It was because of his mother, but let me get there. I am not saying that it was her fault. Even before I learned Spanish, I knew that he had to apologize to her almost every week on the phone. She never forgave him for marrying in Vegas in that way. She also wanted all the ceremony and the wedding planning. He told her and then me that he wished to have a wedding in Chile, but it wasn't safe for him to go there. Pinochet was still in power. He always regretted not being at his best friend's funeral. Sorry, I don't remember his name."

"Maybe Rafael?" I asked.

"Yes! Rafael. Did you meet him, Arturo?"

"Only by Osvaldo's notes," I replied. Rafael was by himself an impressive character, but I didn't want to talk about him, but about Osvaldo. So I didn't gave her more details.

“His mother finally came to America to meet me,” she said smiling. This was a happy memory. “She came with a friend of hers, a widow called Cristina. Osvaldo told me that he and her late husband were friends, and that she also became her mother’s best friend. Mercedes came also to see the doctor. At that time I think I was pregnant with Norman already. Osvaldo came from the airport with the ladies and I went to welcome them. I even learned the word *suegra* to call my mother in law. ‘*Mucho gusto, suegra,*’ I said in my brand new Spanish. But instead of a greeting I just received a petrified look from the two ladies. I didn’t even know who was who, but Cristina, who spoke English, was the first to react: ‘I am very sorry; she said, “but you are just the twin of my daughter. She was called Cristina, like me. She passed away too soon.”’”

The bald waiter asked us if we wanted something else. We still had half a bottle of wine, so we said no. I poured more into her glass.

“I felt conned,” she continued. “I imagined that if Norman was a girl, her name would be Cristina! Fortunately he was a boy. Mercedes’s friend went back to Chile and my mother in law remained for some blood tests or something. We discovered she had cancer and Osvaldo put her in a new experimental therapy at the NIH. She was past the age of the subjects they needed for the study, but somehow he managed to put her there. She died anyway when I was six months pregnant. She was 79. Her friend Cristina came for the funeral and I didn’t want to go because I was pregnant and everybody thought it was ok. My mother told me once that funerals were bad for pregnant women and their babies. He cremated her and her

friend took the ashes back to Chile. The people from the office went to the service. That was good: the lady had a good funeral. That's what Osvaldo told me."

I could recognize Astrum Aureum's hand in that mysterious acceptance in the NIH experimental program. I asked Caroline about the society, but of course she didn't know anything about it, and even the name sounded funny for her. She told me about Norman's birth and she blamed a postpartum depression for her divorce.

"When we could start having sex again..." She suddenly stopped.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I've never told anyone about this before, Arturo."

"You don't need to tell me anything you don't want to," I replied.

"When we started having sex again," she was unstoppable this time; it was as if intimacy disappeared as a concept. "I did something really cruel: 'you can call me Cristina if you want,' I said. First he looked at me and when he finally talked he just said, 'how dare you!' Of course we didn't make love that night. Then I began with questions about her. I wanted to know how did she die, but he never told me about it, never. I found a picture of her and she really looked like me." She stopped again and smiled with sadness.

"Is there anything wrong?"

Caroline looked at me and laughed a little.

"I believed that Cristina was haunting me," she said. "I was certain that one day she would possess my body and send my soul to hell! What could be more stupid than that?"

If she knew the “spiritual” practices in which Cristina was involved, she wouldn’t think her suspicions were stupid. However, I think that it was only auto-suggestion, and I didn’t want to give her any reason to believe that absurdity again. I wonder what will she think when she read this.

“One day I just said that I wanted a divorce and he said yes. He gave me everything I wanted, including the house, and he went every Saturday to see Norman. I got married again, and I divorced again. This time it was just because I wasn’t in love with my new husband. I could never forget Osvaldo. I forgave him and I tried to go back, but this time he didn’t accept me. He said that I was right and that he married me just because I was so like his Cristina and that was not fair... We began to date, we even ended in bed a couple of times, and then I received this wonderful job offer from LA and I went there. It was an offer made in heaven. At the time I had already left my job at the government and I was working as a secretary in some lawyer’s firm, and suddenly this incredible offer appeared from nowhere.”

I again recognized the hand of the Astrum Aureum Society and I understood that Osvaldo was then more powerful than Felipe was in his own time. Maybe that was the time when he was already the Great Master of the American *Stonehenge*.

We finished the bottle of wine and we said goodbye. She hadn’t even noticed the name of the secret society her ex-husband directed in some long period between the nineties and the two thousands. However, she gave me an idea of the power that Astrum Aureum had and still has in the United States. The NIH experimental program and that job offer made in Heaven were too notoriously in the Astrum Aureum style.

She took her car and went in the opposite direction of the bus I was waiting for. It took almost twenty minutes, but the bus finally came and its air conditioning relieved me from the weariness that the wet air causes in summer. When I recovered my consciousness inside the bus, I realized that Caroline felt much better after talking to me. She slightly opened for me the window to see the enormous power that Astrum Aureum had in the United States and in the whole world. If I believed Osvaldo, they were supposed to have an ideal, but I knew that Osvaldo didn't share those beliefs anymore when he was the Great Master. Only in that bus I realized that this revelation was almost like discovering that the Pope was an atheist, or maybe its meaning was even deeper than that. I missed my bus stop while I was thinking

I walked back home from the wrong bus stop and I realized that I also had my own ghosts in Chile. The time to confront them was about to come.

Immediately after Leonor left me before the security check, I regretted my trip. I remembered that this was not a memoir anymore. After the changes Osvaldo and I made to the names and places in his notes, and after my last edit, there was not much reality in it. I wondered why I was traveling to Chile in search of some truth if I was supposed to be a fiction writer. I drank a coffee. Maybe it wasn't a wise decision: I would need my ability to sleep. From Ronald Reagan airport I had to fly to Miami and then I had to take an eight hours flight to my fatherland. I was doing all that effort to interview an old woman in the name of the truth. The voice called me to gate 32 and I walked obediently. I gave them the flying papers that I never

understood and a woman let me in with a smile. I always liked flying and I still had good friends in my country. I would be there for three weeks and I would have plenty of time to visit all my friends, meet their new children and see how big were the babies we left when we abandoned Chile. I was supposed to be glad. My wife couldn't travel with me and I would miss her, but in compensation, I would have those long conversations with my friends until past midnight. She was never able to stay up that late. Three weeks in Chile sounded good, but some ghosts were waiting for me there; I didn't want to find them again.

I arrived in Miami and I had two hours before the next flight. Miami was like an intermediate zone between the United States and Chile: they were speaking Spanish, but their Cuban Spanglish sometimes made it easier to keep English. People can be very separated by a common language. I went to a store and I thought about buying a book. There were also books in Spanish and I remembered that the last book I read in Spanish was *Bosque Quemado (Burned Forest)*, a year ago. I read it because it was Brodsky's and I liked it.

The titles of the novels were mere translations of their titles in English, except for Cortazar's *Rayuela (Hopscotch)* and Bolaño's books. I took in my hands *The Savage Detectives*. I read it a long time ago in its original language and I remembered that I thought it was an autobiography in the form of a novel. I also thought that Bolaño was trying to write the most that he could because he was dying and he knew it.

Thinking about Bolaño made me realize that fiction is truth and truth is fiction: when a writer tries to create fiction, the truth makes its way to it and all the

characters are just like the people he knows; when somebody tries to write nonfiction, his perspectives and ideas transform it into something that has not much to do with plain facts. My alterations to Osvaldo's story made it in some way even truer than its original. My travel made perfect sense. I didn't buy the novel. Instead I went to a Starbucks and read the Chilean news on my tablet. Almost all the news was about the students and their struggle against the Government. I was with the students, of course. I was against the right wing and that distanced me from my father, who was – and still is – a total fascist who defended Pinochet's Dictatorship as if it was a golden age. This was the main ghost. I could not be considered a serious writer or intellectual until I made a statement against my own father. A writer could not separate himself from politics in any Latin American country. Fortunately supporting Pinochet was now unacceptable even inside the hypocritical right wing parties. My father did not seem to know about this.

I realized that my own apprehensions were the only burden I had on that trip. Osvaldo had even left money and in Chile ten thousand dollars are more than enough to have a very good time. The only bad thing was Leonor couldn't come with me, but I left most of the money for another trip with her, maybe a cruiser. We liked cruises.

The voice called the number of the flight and a gate: gate 49. 49 is seven times seven, and therefore is a cabalistic expression of perfection and something that an adept of the Astrum Aureum could read in a magic manner. I just took my suitcase and my backpack and obeyed the anonymous female voice again. I looked

into my wallet and the sleeping pill was still there. It's good to be married to a doctor: I didn't even feel the flight from Miami.

I arrived at 7 AM and it was a good time to arrive. One of the immigration officers asked where I was from. It seemed that I didn't sound Chilean anymore, but generic Latino with the neutral Spanish that nobody really speaks in the Spanish speaking countries, except for *CNN en Español*. I said I was Chilean and he made an untranslatable joke. It was a joke understandable only by Chileans and it wasn't really friendly, but a kind of test. If I did not laugh, he would probably proceed to a more exhaustive revision. But the joke was funny. I entered in my fatherland without any trouble. In the airport I found the Gatsby cafeteria open and I asked for a coffee and a cheese and ham sandwich for breakfast. That sandwich is called Barros Jarpa in Chile. Not being a foreigner felt funny. While I was having breakfast, I called Leonor from the tablet. My cellphone was still useless. We talked like babies about things that don't concern anybody else: just the usual tender things and confessing that we missed each other. Then I bought a chip and my old all American phone became Chilean. Finally I went to the ATM to get some cash for the shuttle. The bills felt like play money. The smallest bill in Chile is the one thousand pesos bill; it is the equivalent of two dollars.

The trip to downtown Santiago was fifteen thousand pesos – like thirty bucks –then I took a taxi to my in laws' house. That would be my center of operations. I couldn't go to my mother's house because she lived with my crazy brother and he still thought that my other brother Pablo and I were responsible for the entire evil of the world and his life – another of my ghosts. I chose not being there. Who could

want to be in the same place with such a freak? My mom kept his diagnosis secret, but it was clear to me that he was sick and that was all I needed to know. He even planned to kill me once. I know about it, because he told that to a friend we had in common.

“What do you think about the whole thing?” the cab driver asked me. He was talking about the protests against the government, of course. I felt a *déjà vu*. Chileans have been marching since the sixties. I wondered if this was another of my ghosts.

“It’s the only way,” I said. Chileans wanted back their public education that was taken by Pinochet. President Piñera’s administration wanted to put at the same level the private and the public universities, and to privatize the student loans. That would leave most of the people out of college education, and therefore out of decent jobs.

The cab driver told me he had a daughter in college. She was doing a teaching major and they already had a huge debt – probably her father made more money with his cab than the money she would make with her degree. Most of the Chilean cab drivers were the owners of their cars.

“These people want to take everything from everyone and they don’t care about the rest of us!” said the cab driver. “They think that they are better than we are just because they were born with money!”

The cab finally arrived to my in law’s house. Their house was huge and old, and they always had problems warming it in winter. Houses didn’t have central

heating in Santiago, partly because it was never as cold as it was in some places of the United States.

I opened the front yard gate and I closed it again with my key. Santiago was not a city for open doors. My in law's house was very beautiful, but it was surrounded by a concrete wall and it had bars covering the windows. I opened the door and Corso gave me his welcome. He came with his tail up and he almost jumped on me. Fortunately he is a small beagle or I could end like *Frederick Flintstone* under *Dino*. It was Wednesday; therefore nobody was at home at that time in the morning. I put my stuff in Leonor's room – it was the room of her childhood – and then I used their Jacuzzi and felt renewed. I went down and I realized that they had left me some breakfast, but I had mine in the airport. I decided to have breakfast again. Leonor wasn't there to scold me, and I decided to allow my obscene appetite for food to take control for a while. Chanco cheese was not available in America and it was delicious.

The house phone rang; it was Leonor asking for more baby talk. I even sang a song for her into the phone. When I hung the phone, I agreed with Osvaldo and I understood that those apparently meaningless conversations were the most meaningful ones. The phone rang for a second time and I thought that it was she again, so I answered with my baby voice.

"Mister Ruiz?" said a male voice.

"Yes, I am," I said talking like a grown man this time.

"We are informed that you are working on a book about a person who was a mutual friend," said the voice.

"Am I?" I asked. "Maybe if you tell me who are you, I could confirm or deny your information, sir."

"I am a representative of the Golden Star Foundation," said the voice. Of course I knew whom he was talking about from the beginning. I was just playing stupid because I was surprised.

"I am not familiar with any Golden Star," I lied.

"Maybe you are more familiar with our name in Latin," explained the voice.

I knew that Norman had betrayed me, and that he told the Astrum Aureum about me. Who else could it be? In spite of the obvious, I decided to continue playing the innocent.

"Now I understand!" I faked enthusiasm. "I wonder if I could have an interview with any of you. Your society had a great spiritual impact on Mister Chandía's life."

"Sorry, we don't give any interviews, Mister Ruiz," answered the voice. For a moment I thought I was talking to a robot. "I don't know what Mister Chandía told you, sir, but we are just a beneficent foundation."

"Well," I answered, "Norman has Chandía's original manuscript, sir, I barely translated it."

"Does he?" said the voice. The man seemed confused and human for the first time.

"Of course, after I took the information I gave him back all the papers," I confessed. It was the truth. I hate keeping papers, so I scanned all the material after I used it and then I returned the originals to Norman.

"Do you have a copy?" asked the voice.

"I already had all I needed and I didn't make any copy in order to respect Mister Chandía's privacy," I lied again. Lying was becoming a new habit and I didn't like it.

"Is it possible to look to your manuscript?" asked the voice.

"Sorry, but I never show unfinished manuscripts, sir," I firmly said. "How did you know I was here?"

"Mister Norman Chandía told us you would be in Chile," answered the voice.

"Yes, but he didn't know I would be in this house."

"We made our inquiries, sir. Please understand that you have nothing to fear from us!" Of course he wanted to scare me. Astrum Aureum Society was not violent, but they could easily make someone's life more difficult if they wanted.

"I didn't imply anything like that," I lied again. "I just wanted to know. Whom I am talking to?"

"A representative of the Golden Star Foundation, sir." The voice recovered its robotic sound.

"And do you happen to have a name?"

"Miguel Perez, sir," he said. But that name was too common to be true.

"Do you have any headquarters of something, Miguel?"

"Our address is private, sir."

"Where is the Chilean *Stonehenge*?"

"To my knowledge, sir, *Stonehenge* is a Neolithic construction in Britain and there is nothing like that in this country."

“Can I become a member of your foundation, *Mister Perez?*”

“People can only be a part of it with an invitation, Mister Ruiz.”

“How can I send you the manuscript when is finished?”

“I can give you an email or a PO box.”

The man gave me the data and hung up after saying goodbye politely, like a butler. I would like to say that I had contacts in the post office to know the name of the owner of the PO box, but I had not. The email account could be opened literally by everyone.

I went to the kitchen and I tried to think. I gave Norman a first version of the translation of his father’s memoir and I also gave him back all the originals after I scanned them. Norman told Astrum Aureum about the manuscript and me, but he didn’t give them the original or my first version. I understood that he wanted to ascend in the Astrum Aureum’s scale and his father memoirs could be an obstacle. I connected my tablet and I made a call to the United States.

“Hi, Norman.”

“Hi, Arturo.” He sounded nervous, “how was your trip?”

“Your friends want the manuscript, Norman.”

“Who?” he asked.

“I just received an interesting phone call, they wanted to see the manuscript.”

“Will you give them the manuscript?” he asked.

“You have your dad’s original and my first draft, you can do it.”

“Did you tell them that I had it?”

"I told them that you have your dad's original manuscript and all the documents," I admit I was enjoying the moment.

"Why did you tell them!" he exclaimed.

"Why did you tell them about me, Norman?"

I received a silence from my tablet.

"Let me tell you a story," I said. "In 1898 a writer called Morgan Robertson wrote a novel called *The Wreck of Titan, or Futility*. *Titan* was an unsinkable ship that in the novel suffered the same destiny that Titanic suffered in real life."

"Are you telling me that you believe in prophecies?" he asked.

"No, I'm not. I believe in intertextuality," I replied. "Sometimes authors like me happen to write stories that are very similar to processes in real life or other books that we haven't read before. *The Wreck of Titan* is maybe the most impressive case. The thing is, Norman, that in normal circumstances, when they read my novel, they would believe that it was a case of pure coincidence. But now they are aware that it is not mere intertextuality. They know that I met your father and you. I changed places, names and situations. You'll be the only one to blame. This could perfectly pass as a work of fiction."

"How much do you want for stopping your work!" asked Norman.

"I don't know," I answered.

"How about fifty grand?" he offered.

"One hundred," I joked.

"Give me your account number," he asked.

"Are you serious, Norman?"

“Yes, I am,” he cried. “All this was a mistake, Arturo. I shouldn’t have introduced you to my dad.”

“What did they do to you in that order?”

“My father never understood the privilege that it means to belong to the Astrum Aureum! He wasn’t good enough for the order! He became a bitter skeptic, but now I have the opportunity of belonging to a brotherhood of the best men of the world!”

I would like having been able to tell him that his father gained the deepest understanding of the true nature of certain privileges, and of the vanity of such claims of superiority. Osvaldo did it at great cost. I was in Chile to try to understand the exact nature of that cost.

“Do you really believe that you are better than everybody else because you belong to that society, Norman?”

“No, I don’t believe that,” said Norman. “It is because I am better that I belong to the brotherhood. It is because I was prepared by millions of reincarnations that I finally found the Astrum Aureum...”

“Good bye, Norman.” I pressed the finish icon and the phone call disappeared. The only way to learn certain things is the difficult way: experience. Osvaldo’s experience was painful enough to make it impossible for him to write an ending for his own story. I had nothing else to say to Norman. He would have to learn by his own difficult way. He didn’t have my Skype account because I only used it to call Chile. I was calling his phone and he couldn’t call back.

I went to the backyard and I saw the lemon tree was full of lemons. The grass was green and my mother in law's small orchard was still there. I always liked my in laws' back yard. I took my phone and I made the call I came to make.

"Hello," answered Rosa.

"Hello, Rosa, this is Arturo Ruiz."

"How did you know my name, sir?" I could not be sure, but I thought she was somehow flirting with me.

"I heard Cristina calling you the other day. Is she at home?"

"She is at the hospital, sir."

I was afraid of being too late.

"Is she all right?"

"Yes, she is, sir. She is actually visiting a friend and her nephew is with her. Madam is like a rock!"

For a moment I wanted to kill that woman, but hating her was impossible because of her candor.

"Can you tell her that I am already in Chile?"

"There she is coming, sir!"

Rosa left the phone and I heard some indecipherable talking. After a while she came back to the phone.

"Are you still there, sir?"

"Yes, I am."

"Madam says that you are invited to have lunch tomorrow at 1:30."

After I thanked Rosa, I suddenly remembered I was neither a hero nor in the position of having an institution as powerful as the Astrum Aureum against me. They wouldn't kill me, or kidnap my wife, or do anything like that. But they could just close the doors for me and leave me without my modest teaching job and my brilliant future. That was their style.

They didn't know about the content of the manuscript. Norman didn't tell them. I thought that his greatest fear was that they could find that his father was never a member of the society, but just an impostor. The most stupid thing Norman could do was calling the society's attention to me. He was now terrified. I knew he would never show them the black copybook, but I was not sure about what to do. Life was hard for me before and I was not in the mood for being unemployed again.

In the times before *Los Pájaros Negros* and the MFA, I lived in an age I called the war against the whole world. However, the world was not actually against me. I just could not fit in because of different circumstances, like belonging to the wrong family, having the wrong network, and being in the wrong place – politically speaking. Nor had I any actual enemy nor was anybody wishing me bad, with the exception of some ex-girlfriends. I thought how a new war against the whole world could be with such a formidable enemy.

Nony, my mother in law, came home, and interrupted my paranoid insights. I open the gate for her car and she looked happy to meet me. She was also a doctor like my father in law and Leonor. A family of doctors is a good family. Mine is a family of lawyers and maybe that's why it is not a real family anymore. I am the black sheep because I didn't like the profession. Medical doctors are a different and

better kind of people than lawyers. She asked about my trip, Leonor, the plane, and finally she asked about the purpose of my travel.

“Who is this person you will interview?”

Her smile was sincere and I decided that I couldn’t tell her about the call and the less she knew about the Astrum Aureum the better.

“I have this incomplete manuscript and this woman is the only one who can tell me how it ends,” was the only comment I made. I said nothing about the brotherhood.

“Are the lacunas too big?” asked Nony.

“As big as the whole ending of the book,” I answered.

“Is this a memoir of someone else? I thought you didn’t do that kind of work.”

“Well,” I smiled, “you know I do any kind of work they pay me for, but I prefer fiction. This will be a weird book because I cannot reveal the true identity of its main character and I had to change too many things to consider it nonfiction...” I stopped.

“What happens?” asked Nony.

“It is fiction,” I concluded, “but it’s also the truth.”

I didn’t know if this book would ever see the light. The Astrum Aureum probably would not allow it. The most reasonable thing to do was abandon the project. Showing the manuscript to the Astrum Aureum was a flagrant act of treason against Osvaldo. On the other hand, having an enemy like that secret society was just stupid. Against all common sense, I decided to go on.

Nony and I had lunch together. It was a light lunch because Marco, my father in law, planned something special for the night. It was a nice house and they were

nice people. Leonor and I lived there for two months before leaving to the United States. She always missed her parents and she talked to them every night on the tablet or on her computer.

That night she was present on the screen while my father in law was making his famous jokes and the barbecue. He was always really funny, but I had to make an effort to laugh that night. I was concerned and angry. The common sense response was being reasonably scared; I was angry because there was this society doing whatever they wanted. I really put my best effort in Osvaldo's story and they just asked to inspect my manuscript. They didn't threaten me. They only showed their power by calling a number that they were not supposed to have.

"Put on that song to your baby," said Marco.

In the United States after we bought the tablet, I started to play lullabies from YouTube to make Leonor sleep just like a baby. She found some Chilean songs and I told Marco about it. Her favorite was one called *El Tonto Perico* (Stupid Perico); this was a song about a kid who wasn't too smart.

We put the song on and we sang it together for Leonor. She was ashamed of being discovered in her most childish aspect, but she was having fun anyway and enjoying being the center of the attention. Then my mother called and said that she would see me that weekend and instructed me to not call home. My crazy brother didn't know that I was in Chile. I didn't call. Nevertheless, a few days later he knew I was in the country after my Chilean publisher arranged a book signing for *Los Pájaros Negros* in one of the *Feria del Libro* bookstores – the Chilean equivalent of Barnes & Noble. It was a big deal and my mother got really mad at me. I couldn't

care less. A writer needs publicity and I was not supposed to keep secrets, except for some names and places. That first night in Chile, however, she was still nice on the phone, I guess: I never pay full attention to her because it is not healthy.

Nobody noticed I was concerned. I behaved as if everything was normal. In the afternoon before the barbecue I emailed my number to my old friends and we agreed to different meetings from Thursday night to Sunday. The first one was with my cousin Rodolfo, who was a lawyer and a good person at the same time. That was not a frequent combination.

I think that the only explanation for my good sleeping that night was the wine we drank with the beef. Wine always puts me in a good mood, but also makes me sleepy. The next morning Nony, Marco and I had breakfast together. Then they went to their jobs and to their normal lives. When I was alone I went to the garage and I saw our old Fiat Palio. My in laws always talked about it and how they had it in perfect shape. It was a red car, so Leo and I called it *rojito* (little red). Parking in downtown Santiago was always expensive and difficult, so I thought it was better to take a taxi. I walked to Irarrázaval Street; that was the main street of the neighborhood and the place where I could find a cab. Miraculously a taxi appeared just a block from my in laws' house. It was still early, but I wanted to walk by downtown Santiago and have a coffee in the Haiti Café. That was the place for meetings for men in the city –the waitresses wore miniskirts and were very beautiful. Only in Chile a place like that could be perfectly honorable.

“Will you go to the march, sir?” asked me the cab driver. He wore sunglasses and moustache, so I barely saw his face from the back seat.

“Not today,” I said; I was sure that my friend Jessica would make me march before I was back in America – she did it. She was a revolutionary woman who marched from before the Dictatorship when she was just a girl. She was still marching with her children in college. Her moral authority made her requests mandatory. She and her husband had a schedule to march against the government in different shifts.

The marches were the topic. While this cab driver also complained about rich people and how they thought they were better than everybody else, I remembered the phone call of the morning before. The alleged Miguel Perez ordering me to submit my manuscript to an organization to which I didn’t belong was just obnoxious. The members of the Astrum Aureum also thought that they were better than everybody else and better than me. For a reason I didn’t know, they also thought that I was not good enough to be one of them. They were just like the people in the Chilean administration that didn’t wanted everybody to be educated. I wanted to go with Jessica to march right then, but I had a job to do first. I could not risk being arrested or injured by the police before my interview. A few days later, before coming back to the United States, I managed to escape from the police, but tear gas made me vomit. It was just like old times. However, when I was in that taxi, I was focused on my task. I was almost able to listen to Rafael and his memorable conversations with Osvaldo. I could almost hear how he told him to do whatever it took to survive and progress. I wanted to follow the same advice, but I didn’t know how. I hoped that visiting the scene of those conversations could help me think.

“Let’s better go to San Diego Street, please,” I told the driver.

Osvaldo didn't tell his original address or the address of Babel bookstore. San Diego was still the street of the used bookstores. He kept all those data in the dark and I made them even darker. But San Diego Street was one of those truths that are impossible to hide. Bookstores were mixed with the bookstands on the street. People walked looking for rare books and school texts and one got the impression of being in a city of scholars. Many copies of the books were pirated, but San Diego survived mostly as a legal business. I thought about my tablet and was certain that I was seeing the last days of bookstores. I decided to enjoy them.

I paid the cab driver and he didn't stop talking against the government – in Chile all cab drivers are philosophers; for some reason they are the intellectuals of the working class. I began to walk by that street. It was one of the places that were just the same from the seventies and not many places had the quality of being eternal. I had the illusion of finding the bookstore that Osvaldo and I called Babel. It was an almost stupid illusion. However, I found it. After two blocks a sign with the same name announced a used bookstore. I desperately needed to be sure if it was the same. Somehow it became a vital part of my investigation. The place was just like many other used bookstores. There was nothing special about it. In a funny paradox, that was why the place was unique. I normally don't like paradoxes, but I felt that in this particular paradox there was something like the meaning of life.

I went inside and I asked a boy behind the counter, but he was like twenty and he couldn't know. I stayed for a while, looking at the books, trying to find some clue about Osvaldo, Rafael, or Cristina. Most of the books were not used, but new. I

found a new edition of Canto General and I thought about buying it, but a man interrupted my romance with the book.

“Excuse me, sir,” said the man who brought me back to reality, “but yes, this bookstore was here in the seventies and it had the same name.”

I was about to cry. I’d been working on that place for a year and this middle-aged guy with glasses had just told me about it. He hadn’t met Rafael. He said that a man who came back from his exile in Sweden sold him the place in the nineties, and the bookstore was closed before that. I guessed it was Rafael’s son.

I bought three books of Neruda and an old book of Gabriela Mistral. Those poets are read by all Chileans in high school and I personally read too much of both. I was trying to connect with Rafael, Osvaldo, and Cristina; I was using magic thinking in an irrational and consumerist way. When I finally went out of the bookstore, I felt as dirty and sentimental as a soap opera fan. I wasn’t that stupid to believe I could buy the meaning of life in the form of books I read over and over from my childhood. However, I behave as if I believed precisely that. Buying stuff cannot tell anybody who he is, but it can calm anxiety for a while. Maybe that’s the best we can have.

I walked to Cristina’s apartment. It was still too early, but I had the whole downtown in between. I stopped in a café called Bombay. I used to meet there with an old friend and I thought I could find him. I didn’t have his phone number, because I didn’t use the phone from the United States. However he knew I was in Chile and we met some days later, in precisely the same place. It was not Haiti Café, but it was the same concept of beautiful waitresses wearing miniskirts. Santiago was full of

memories and those memories distracted me from the phone call of the day before. As if going to San Diego Street wasn't enough, I went to *Manantial* Bookstore and then I bought more books in Spanish. Manantial was a big traditional bookstore at Plaza de Armas, the center of the center of Santiago and the mile 0 of the country. One of the entrances looked at the square and to the street artists who were selling their paintings. I regretted going there when I realized I had to buy a new suitcase. It was a stupid thing to do: I don't even remember the titles of the books I bought. In the bookstore a woman in her thirties recognized me by the picture on *Los Pájaros Negros* and I had to sign a copy.

"You look much better in person!" she said.

"I selected my worst picture just to hear that," I answered and it was almost true. I sent six pictures to my publisher and he selected the worst of them because he thought it had some quality, maybe the quality of being horrible. I accepted because I had to travel to the United States in a few days and I didn't have the time for arguing. The effect was good and many people told me the same that that woman told me that day. She seemed excited about meeting the author at the same time she was buying the book. I would feel the same. She had dark hair and was not bad looking. In other times I probably would have invited her a coffee or something. Instead I just smiled and said goodbye, as is the proper thing to do for a married man.

I also bought the most useless items in different stores. I refuse to confess the futile nature of those souvenirs that I bought as presents that I wouldn't be giving to anyone. After my episode of compulsive buying, I was out of cash and I had to buy

something to take to Cristina's house. As my card was American, every transaction had an extra commission, so I decided to go to an ATM and get as much cash as I could and that was about the equivalent of four hundred dollars. That was a small fortune in Chile. I asked for my balance, just to keep things in order. I had fifty thousand dollars more. Of course, Norman was buying my silence from Maryland. I never gave him my account number: it was another exhibition of power of the Astrum Aureum.

Norman wanted to bribe and intimidate me and he was succeeding. The society was able to open and close doors not of heaven, but here on earth, and I didn't want to find closed doors before me. I remembered the woman at Manantial bookstore:

"Excuse me, are you Arturo Ruiz? My friend loved your book! Can you sign a copy for me?" Those words can be even annoying sometimes, but those words also showed that I had accomplished something: putting my work in someone else's mind and making her dream, think, and suffer anxiety about non existent characters. It seemed somehow pointless, absurd. However that was precisely my job. As a matter of fact, if I was able to choose, I would rather be a doctor or a lawyer as my parents wanted me to be. I became a writer in spite of myself, and I could not reach any peace until I embraced my destiny, my disease or what ever this condition was. Fifty thousand dollars were not enough to buy my silence. I even began to write in my second language to avoid the Chilean silence. There was simply no way to silence me anymore, even if I had to listen to all the common places in every book signing. I had already invested a whole year in this project. I was not ready to stop. I decided

to use Norman's money if I could not find a publisher. Because of Norman, not even the Astrum Aureum Society would be able to stop me. Maybe it wasn't an intelligent move, but being intelligent just didn't seem right. I didn't care if I had to fight another war against the whole world, but I feared it; this was my biggest fear ever.

I was already near Cristina's. It was actually my former neighborhood and she lived in the wide building that looked like a ship. The windows looked at Santa Lucía Hill, which was a lone hill turned into a very beautiful park. At night Santa Lucía was the place where clandestine loves of all kind took place. I wondered if Cristina could see some of the action from her window.

I bought her something sweet. I don't remember the name of it, but it was some Persian dessert I bought at "El Bombón Oriental" a famous Persian bakery. I don't like sweets, so I bought it just as a courtesy for Cristina. If I was a good writer, I should remember a detail like the name of that dessert, but after I saw the money in my account, I was nervous and actually a little bit sad. It was the only time when I was sad because I had some extra money. I was about to interview the old woman who would give me the end of my story, but to what purpose? I didn't know if I would be able to publish my book and I probably would have more enemies and even more powerful than those I had once in Chile. I have to confess I was afraid and everything was like a sinister *déjà vu*: I needed a decade to clean up the fascist past of my family and even I had to stop talking to my father: twenty years after the Dictatorship, he continued his public defense of the criminals under Pinochet's era. It was hard, but I couldn't sink with him – actually he was a retired colonel and also a lawyer. He had his private practice and his not small pension from the army. He

wasn't sinking at all. I was the only one who was sinking. That was the biggest Chilean ghost.

I already decided that I would publish the book, even if I had to self-publish it. But who read a self published author? If there were a Hell, it would be to become a self-published author for all eternity.

I did what I had to do and finally left my country to become anonymous and have a fresh start. It was very hard, but it had finally worked nicely; I had this formidable project, and suddenly a superior power was trying to cut my wings and it probably was about to smash me again. Nevertheless I went to interview Cristina. That was the reason for my trip and the die was cast. I turned off my cellphone and I walked to her building. One side of it had oeil de bouefs disposed in columns from the first to the last floor and the building had round corners that made it look like a ship. In front of it there was a fountain with bronze sculptures of Neptune and Thetis, sitting among the indifferent pedestrians. I finally arrived at the building. The doorman asked me where I was going and my name. I told him. Almost every building had to have a doorman. His mission was keeping other people from getting in the building to steal or sell stuff. Things like that didn't happen in the seventies. Pinochet's capitalist economy created outcasts and they became thieves.

"Please come in," he finally said. I got into an old manual elevator carrying all my bags. I had to close the door by myself and the elevator began its slow ascendance. I probably didn't look too glamorous with all my shopping bags. I guess I didn't even look like an American tourist, but like a peasant after his annual trip to the capital city. That concern about how one's social status was reflected in one's

appearance was so Chilean. I didn't have that kind of concern in the United States. I didn't like what my country did to me. That's why I avoided going back.

The elevator was slow. It gave me enough time to remember that I lived in a building two blocks from there. Lastarria was a neighborhood for old people mixed with hipsters, and the entire eccentric crowd of Santiago composed of poets, clothes designers, artisans, artists and a new out of the closet gay community. I think it was because all the buildings had one or two bedroom apartments that were perfect for single people, couples without children and old people with empty nests, like Cristina.

The elevator finally arrived at the fifth floor and there was her apartment. I knocked and a chubby small brunette in her forties opened the door.

"Are you the writer?" she anxiously asked.

I remembered the conversation of the day before and my new account balance.

"I guess," I said. I wondered if I could continue writing after this book on which I was working, or even if this book would ever see the light.

"Are you?" she asked again. Of course she didn't understand my ironies against myself.

"Yes, I am," I said and only then she let me in. I gave her the dessert I bought at the Persian store. She seemed confused and went to the kitchen, leaving me alone in the lobby. The apartment was the testimony of a former antique dealer. On the old and crafted wooden table in the lobby I saw an image of Buddha that I guessed was from Mercedes's collection. The walls were covered by decorated plates and

among them, a black and white photograph of Cristina, the late daughter. She smiled at me with her femme fatale appearance framed in old golden wood. She had a special place in the lobby and then I discovered another picture of her in the living room. The second one was in color and in a black crafted wooden frame. I remembered Caroline. She seemed her twin, but Caroline didn't have the seductive eyes of Cristina. Instead she had a frank and direct blue gaze. It was the sight of a woman with nothing to hide. I remembered that when I first met Caroline, I thought that I could read her soul if I looked into her eyes. I didn't do it because it was not wise for a man to get lost inside of women's eyes, especially if he was already married. Cristina's eyes were different: they were the eyes of a woman full of secrets even from those small color photographs; in black and white, her gaze seemed as if it could devour the one who dared to look. I understood Osvaldo and I thought that neither I could probably forget a woman like her.

Her mother called me from the living room.

"Please, Arturo, come in! This Rosa sometimes is so clumsy!"

The living room was full of even more objects and I could see the influence of Mercedes in Cristina's taste. Porcelain sculptures, Japanese paintings – I recognized the famous *Great Wave* by Hokusai and some other paintings of the period. I missed the erotic paintings, but a woman like Cristina would not put them on the walls of her living room if she had them. A small table was already set for two, but Cristina was sitting on a black leather couch. Her white and abundant hair was carefully disposed in a complicated and delightfully old-fashioned bun; her skin was amazingly juvenile for a woman in her nineties, however, a cane beside her was a

clear signal of old age. She was not wearing stilettos anymore. I guessed it was another concession made to the whole aging process. Her dress was red. Nothing too flamboyant, but wearing red was something unexpected for a Chilean woman of her age. It was also unexpected to reach her age in such condition.

“Nice to meet you at last!” she welcomed me. “First of all I want your autograph!”

She produced two copies of *Los Pájaros Negros*. She wanted one dedicated to her and the other for Rosa.

“She can barely read,” she whispered, “but she was so emotional about meeting a writer. Her aunt María used to meet artists, writers, and all kind of interesting people. After Pinochet my house became alive! Artists and intellectuals forgave my late husband’s activities. They did it because I had money, influence and because I was prone to share. Those are the advantages of prosperity: money could buy me love. I hope you don’t mind the fact that I became cynical.” She did not expect an answer. I didn’t mind. As a matter of fact, I liked her elegant cynicism. “Maria was my maid until she died and Rosa is her niece. My social life is now almost nonexistent, so for Rosa, living with me is almost like living as isolated as she was in the lost town where she is from: Matanzas.”

I smiled; I was a little bit surprised. I was in front of a woman of another era, and I had to ask her about painful memories. Fortunately she even seemed happy to meet me and her loquacity was relieving. Would it change when I started to ask questions about her daughter? Osvaldo wasn’t even able to tell that story. It was his taboo, his never closed wound. Even from a grave thousand of miles away, Cristina

was the most formidable rival for Caroline. She was his wife, the mother of his son, and she was alive, but she couldn't win. Everybody knew she was dead, but nobody wanted to tell me how. I knew that was the end of my story – well, I considered it mine already. If the details of Cristina's death were not the explanation for everything, they were at least the closing. How difficult was asking the question! It seemed a kind of sacrilege or at least a major disrespect.

"Please, let's have lunch," she said.

We sat at the small table and despite its size it was properly set. I imagine how her original table was in the big house. She rang a bell and Rosa brought a soup. She did not use a tureen this time. I wondered if it was the same bell Osvaldo talked about. I was there to inquire about too many things and asking about a small bell was a perfect excuse to start. But somehow it didn't feel right. The soup was delicious and Cristina said that it was a Japanese soup called ebi no suimono.

"I love Japanese things," she said and she pointed to her paintings.

"Hokusai," I said.

"You are familiar with him!" she said.

"I love the Ukiyo-e period," I confessed. Finding a common subject was great.

"Hum!" she said. "I couldn't put some of those in my living room." She rang the bell.

"Yes, Madam," Rosa came from the kitchen.

"Please, bring from the studio the folder that says Ukiyo E," asked Cristina.

"Ukiyo what?" asked Rosa.

"It's the only one that says Ukiyo," said Cristina with a smile.

Rosa came back with a thick black portfolio.

"Please," Cristina said me.

"Excuse me," I said and I stood up. With her it was clearly necessary to keep all the formalities.

I took the portfolio and there were many engravings of the Ukiyo-e period, including the erotic engravings of Hokusai, Kiyonaga, and some others I couldn't recognize right then, but I identified later.

"Impressive!"

"Please accept them as a present," said Cristina.

"But this is a small fortune!" I said.

"I am not in the business of saving for the future, Arturo. Please don't be rude talking about money and accept them."

"Thank you very much, Cristina." Cristina was polite, but she was giving me an order. I decided to obey.

I returned to the table and then we had a shrimp starter that was delicious and then the entrée: some kind of pasta, which name I didn't know. I was too moved by the Ukiyo-e engravings to ask. I always was a fan of *The Floating World* and in my amateur painting I futilely tried to imitate it.

"I used to hate those engravings. It was Rafael who taught me how to enjoy them." She smiled and blushed a little bit. "Of course the erotic ones were his!"

"Of course," I smiled with complicity.

"Did you and Rafael become good friends?" I said.

I didn't know if this was the excuse I needed to talk about what I wanted.

Somehow I had to begin.

"How much do you know?" she asked.

"I think I know until Esteban went to your house and he recognized Osvaldo."

Cristina's lovely expression turned dark.

"When I remember that psycho was once in my house I..." She stopped. I was afraid of her dying. She rang the bell.

"The dessert, Madam?" asked Rosa while she was taking the dishes.

"Yes, please," she said. "I desperately need something sweet!"

"Our dessert or the dessert that Mister Ruiz brought?"

"Oh! You shouldn't," said Cristina, but I knew I did the right thing. "Bring Arturo's and coffee please."

"Ok, madam," said Rosa.

"And after that, please take the afternoon, Rosa. But take your cellphone with you."

"Yes, Madam," answered the maid. She didn't look happy. She certainly wanted to overhear.

"This is a wonderful dessert, Arturo," said Cristina, but she would say the same thing anyway. Cristina was caged in formalities for the rest of her life. That was not much longer, I supposed. But the last thing I knew about her was that she was still alive and well. Maybe she is immortal.

Rosa came without her apron.

"Do you need something else, Madam?"

“No thanks, Rosa, have fun. Come back around seven, please.”

“Goodbye, Madam, sir.”

Rosa could not hide her anger and that amused Cristina. I like people who are unable to hide their emotions.

“She is angry, but I cannot let her see me cry again,” she explained after Rosa left and I knew she was about to tell me everything. “Please be aware that seeing me crying is a possibility.”

Nodding seemed the only proper response I could think of, so I nodded.

She went to sit on her couch and she didn’t accept my help. She walked alone the three yards from the table, and she could avoid the coffee table, the sculpture of a dog, and a pedestal with the sculpture of a girl who was sitting and reading the same book forever. She finally sat and cared about her red dress to be perfect. It was. She had not changed too much from Osvaldo’s notes, except for the stilettos and her age.

“After what happened to my Cristina,” she began, “I hated Felipe with all my soul. I knew it wasn’t fair, but what could I do? I knew that he had something to do with all those strange books and secrets. I didn’t know about Astrum Aureum until some time after.”

This was the first person I heard saying that name who wasn’t a member.

“How did you know?”

“Rafael and then Osvaldo told me about it some time after,” she said, but then suddenly she changed the subject. I decided to let her go. “I hated Felipe and I didn’t

love him anymore. He tried for a while to gain me back, but it was impossible.

Something in my heart was just broken.”

She fell into a deep silence. I thought I had to make a question.

“Did you divorce?” I asked.

“Young man,” she came back, “there was no divorce in this country until the end of the nineties, I think.”

“It was in 2004,” I said, “but people used to declare the nullity of their marriage.”

“But neither I, nor Felipe. I wanted to remain in the board of the Opera House, of the Society of Friends of the Arts, and the Catholic Charity. I even kept going to the church though I didn’t believe in God anymore. I had my period out of it, but then I came back and people believed that God made a miracle in me. It was just that I was boring and I needed the social life associated to church. So I became a hypocritical Catholic and a fake wife. Felipe led his life and I led mine, and there was Rafael. I perverted that man!”

“How was that you and Rafael...?” I began to ask, but she understood.

“It was that day in that Chinese restaurant when I met him for the first time. I found him attractive, but nothing else.”

She took a pause and smiled. I knew that she had found a happy memory and I was glad about it. I wanted to load her with happiness.

“I remember that after that awful man was in my house, I asked Felipe if Osvaldo did something wrong, but my husband told me that certainly not. If that

was the situation, why had he to leave the country and run away like a criminal?"

She stopped and looked at me. "You probably think I was stupid."

"I don't think so, Cristina."

"I believe that you are just too kind, but I'm going to make as if I believe you," she smiled with sadness. Not many people can smile in that way. Those who can, also have the ability to break the hearts of those who are looking at them, or at least my heart.

"But I do believe you, Cristina. Many people didn't know."

I didn't tell her that I was talking about myself. I swallowed the Dictatorship propaganda as the most natural thing in the world. Maybe my father's uniform and the fact that he repeated the same discourse at home helped. I will never forgive him for that. Maybe I should talk about my own case to her, because the evil of many is the consolation of fools. It is a poor form of consolation, but sometimes there are not too many ways to comfort a broken soul. However, I fortunately kept quiet. Cristina was no fool.

"You are so kind," she repeated, "but it was so obvious! A curfew, the small armed confrontations, the soldiers on the streets! Those were clear signs of what was happening, Arturo. I had to have a chief of the CNI in my house to understand it. I felt so alone. The only friend I could talk with was Meme, but she was just frightened and sad for her son. She took me to Rafael and he told me about it. 'Rafael knows better,' my poor little friend used to say. Mercedes was an insult to the feminist movement. She always needed the opinion of a man to solve her doubts. I guess I was a little like her. We were old school women and that meant almost no

school women. But for me that was about to change. Rafael had some acquaintances in the resistance, his son in exile, and some missing friends. That man opened my eyes, but we were just friends until after what happened to Cristina. I was a loyal and faithful wife even in my adultery.”

What happened to Cristina was what I wanted to know the most. For this woman her death also marked a before and an after. However, she skipped the point with the mastery that only the unconscious is able to display. I took the risk of letting her talk until she was ready or until it was dark.

“Rafael wanted me to nullify my marriage and marry him, but that was impossible because of my husband’s and my own position. He never understood that. Even Felipe knew about our relationship. If they never became friends, it was because of their political differences. Nevertheless, they treated each other with respect. Rafael used to say that I was bourgeois hypocrite.” Cristina stopped again and then smiled. “Well, he was right. But if he loved me, he had to love me with my own limitations. After a profound reflection, several fights, leaving and then coming back to me twice, he accepted. That was the most formidable sacrifice a man ever made for me.”

Cristina’s looks went down to the floor and I realized that I had become a therapist for her. I wanted her to keep talking, but sometimes it was difficult to know what to ask. She sighed and then she came back to me by herself.

“I really corrupted that man! His socialist integrity was nothing after I took him and Mercedes on a Caribbean cruise.”

“You took Mercedes too?” I was intrigued.

"Of course! Don't you suspect a married woman going alone in a ship with a man who is not her husband!"

I couldn't help smiling.

"How old are you, Arturo?"

"I'm forty."

"You look even younger," she said and made my day, "but you are still too young to understand. I belong to a generation – and maybe I am the last remains of it – for which appearances were very important. I had a position and I want to believe that I did some good. Many performers had fellowships, also many artists of all kinds, even some writers; it happened just because I kept up the appearances."

"I am not judging you, Cristina." I don't know if I was lying or not when I said that, but I was sincere in my attempt. She gave me a look almost as strong as her daughter's.

"Mercedes was already my best friend and my partner in the antique store," she began to talk about the store and she told me even its address. I will not include that kind of detail because I want this to remain a simple fiction. I let her talk, even though I had pictures of the place. She finally went back to her subject. If one wants to open somebody else's heart, one has to listen patiently. "It's true that I took her just as a chaperone, but she had a great time on the ship and she loved the warm water of the Caribbean. Rafael was so funny! 'I am contaminated by the decadent luxury of capitalism,' he said during the whole trip, "and I like it!" We were like teenagers, except we were old people with experience enough to avoid the stupidity and the unnecessary suffering of adolescence. The sun, Arturo, the sun! You are still

too young to appreciate what a tropical weather can do to an old body! That's why everybody ends her days in Florida in the United States! I've never felt better in my whole life! I could even be completely happy if..."

She stopped. I knew the meaning of the "if."

"We went first to Miami and took the ship to Nassau, then Puerto Rico and then back to Miami, from where we flew back to Chile. In Miami we stayed two weeks and Mercedes saw Osvaldo for the first time since his departure. They stayed together in another hotel and Rafael and I had our honeymoon all alone. We saw them only a few times before we came back to Santiago. Mercedes wanted to stay and Osvaldo promised her to make the arrangements."

"Do you know how did Osvaldo got to America?" This was a golden opportunity to make her talk about my most important interest.

"The Astrum Aureum took him out. It took them just a few days and he was on a plane to..." she said, "excuse me, I don't remember where he arrived first in America, but first he took English lessons and then he got a master's degree in International Service at Georgetown University. He got his citizenship and he worked for the government. I don't know the details of the process, and even he ignored much of it. He wrote me telling me that he was amazed by the power of the Society in the United States and he wondered what would happen if they found that he wasn't a member."

"Did you know that he wasn't a member, Cristina?" I was amazed by this woman telling me the most important of Osvaldo's secrets in the most casual way.

“Of course!” she said in the most disconcerting natural manner. “He told me about it after what happened to Cristina. He wrote me a letter of three pages telling me everything from when his mother bought him the pin with the emblem. He felt guilty.”

“Do you happen to have that letter?” I asked.

She took her cane and she slightly hit a red box under the coffee table.

“Here are all his letters until last year, when he stopped writing me,” she said. “I admit that being dead was an amazing excuse. I wonder how is it that nobody told me that before you did. Most of the letters are for his mother, but after she died he continued writing to me. His hand writing was awful, but his prose was fun.”

“May I take the box? I will give it back to you.”

“Take it as another present,” she answered, “and please choose anything you like in this house. I am too old to have so many things!”

I already gave back Osvaldo’s notebook to Norman. Even though I had electronic copies, I didn’t have anything as strong as the confession written by Osvaldo’s own hand telling that he was an impostor. If Norman did something, I would have a weapon to defend myself. A few days after I talked to Cristina, I sent a scanned copy of the letter to Norman and I gently asked him to leave me alone. I am still waiting for his move.

I was obsessed with her daughter’s death and I didn’t know how to ask about it. Cristina continued talking about her return to Chile from that trip. I politely listened because I learned that, for her, forms were very important and rituals were necessary.

"I wanted us to go back to the Caribbean the next year, but then Felipe died. It was a heart attack. He was 75 – a little bit too young, if you ask me. I went to the funeral only with Mercedes and I was about to play my role as the sad widow and cry. I almost lived in Rafael's apartment and I didn't know where Felipe really lived, but it wasn't in the house in Las Condes that he never wanted to sell. He received his mail and sometimes we even dined there together with our friends, if those people deserved that name. I suspect he lived in the house of the woman who got a big apartment in his will and I guess that she was the woman I saw looking at us from some distance at the cemetery. I would like to meet her, but when I waved at her she walked away. Then and to my own surprise, I began to cry and it was for real. I think maybe I pardoned him that day. I discovered that even though I wasn't in love, I still loved him. I never lacked for anything and after it was set that our marriage was just a social charade, he never caused me any trouble at all. Besides, he wasn't guilty about what happened to Cristina, though Osvaldo thought he was."

"Why did he think Felipe was guilty of the death of Cristina?" I wanted to know his feelings about what happened and what happened. I knew he went to his grave thinking about Cristina, but Osvaldo blaming Felipe was something totally new and I didn't guess that from his notebook.

"You don't know how it was that my daughter died?" Cristina looked at me guessing at last what I wanted to know.

"No, I don't. Osvaldo never mentioned it directly. Cristina was the most important person in his notes. His writing ends abruptly when he saw that Esteban guy in your house and then nothing. He left me a letter with your address..."

“That Osvaldo!” she said and for a moment she looked so upset. Then she recovered her calm. “He loved my girl in a way men don’t usually. It was a special kind of love. My daughter was fortunate for having him. Rafael told me that in some way she had the best life because she lived fast, died young and left a beautiful corpse. But she didn’t have to die in that horrible way!”

I thought that the silence would last an eternity and I didn’t have such time. The whole weight of her memories made impossible to ask the question. I had to exercise an enormous amount of patience and respect, and I am not known for those virtues. I realized that there was a clock somewhere, maybe in another room. I heard the tic-tack for the first time and it was the only sound for the longest while.

“Cristinita was shocked and desperate after Osvaldo’s departure.” Cristina finally began to talk and nobody could stop her. “They agreed to marry in Las Vegas at the end of that year.”

I remembered that Osvaldo married Caroline in Vegas. Around a decade or two later, he tried to pick up his life from where he left it. That was just not possible.

“My daughter wanted to leave with him right away, but Felipe, Osvaldo and I thought that it was better for her if she graduated in Chile. She was in her senior year and about to finish her internship. With her diploma she could continue her studies in America as Osvaldo did. Osvaldo promised to marry her that summer and they joked about being married by an Elvis impersonator.” Cristina made another pause. I knew that telling me this story was maybe the hardest effort in her whole life. I regret I could not put her real name among the acknowledgments. She would never forgive me if I did.

“I feel I am dying, mom,’ she told me once and she destroyed my heart. Cristina was always a daddy’s girl and I always was the villain in that house. After Osvaldo left, things changed. I wondered where was my rebel daughter who was always fighting me. She turned into herself. One day she just went to the mountains alone and left a letter. Well, a note that said ‘I coming back in two days.’ Felipe seemed relieved, but I didn’t understand anything. Then the two days passed and she didn’t came back.”

The announced crying finally came. It was like the fall of the Roman Empire or some other great civilization. This old woman who was the incarnation of elegance, style, and contention let two tears flow on her face. Of course she had box of tissues. She didn’t yell or anything like that. She just sat there with tears on her face and looking to the floor. I have never seen before a pure expression of pain and I hope not to see it again. She almost made me cry.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Please don’t worry,” I said and it sounded stupid.

“May I ask you for a glass of water? There is a bottle in the refrigerator, please,” she said.

“Of course!” I went to the small but functional kitchen and I opened a big two door, steel refrigerator. It was an American one. Chilean refrigerators are much smaller. The bottle of water inside was *Cachantún* brand; I had not seen one of those bottles in years. I poured a glass and I took the bottle and the glass to the living room. When I came back, Cristina wasn’t crying, but neither she was smiling. The used tissues were already in a small container she disposed of beside the couch for

that purpose. I didn't see it when I arrived, so I guessed she had it hidden somewhere.

"Thank you very much, Arturo."

She drank the water and took a breath. I was silent because I didn't know what to say. Now I think that silence was the best response, but then it was just a reflex.

"They found her in an irrigation canal two weeks later. She had some signs drawn on her body and..." Cristina made a pause and then she finally cried without any shyness. "They raped my poor baby! They raped and killed her and then they threw her as if she was a dead animal! Those fucking bastards!"

Listening to the Chilean equivalent for the word 'fuck' from Cristina was one of the most incredible things that ever happened to me. I had the impulse to hug her, but she was not the kind of person that one can touch just like that. She cried for almost five minutes.

"Sorry," she unnecessarily excused herself again, "but it never ceased hurting."

"I can imagine," I said.

"No, Arturo, you cannot and I hope you never can," she said and I remained in silence.

She drank more water.

"Felipe was destroyed," she continued. "I've never seen a grown man crying before. He was an old school male and they didn't cry. I think his crying was the reason I hated him that day, or maybe it was just because I needed to hate someone."

Whatever was the case, it was totally unfair blaming Felipe. That night Osvaldo called and he asked for Cristinita. I had to tell him. 'Those CNI escorts,' he said by the phone, 'they did it!' I don't know if you knew that Felipe, Cristina and I had escorts: Intelligence personnel who took care of us in case of any danger. I told him he was wrong, he had to be wrong. Osvaldo believed that those very CNI agents raped and murdered my daughter. He said that security services of Pinochet were crazy and he blamed my husband because of his association with the Dictatorship. Felipe never believed it, even though they never found anyone responsible for the crime and that was the CNI style. Felipe was part of the Government and he never believed the same security services that were supposed to protect his daughter could rape and kill her. But when there is no rule of law, there is no logic, no meaning, and no sense. No one is safe in such conditions, not even the most powerful people. Too bad learning that in the difficult way. Some people still celebrate the Dictatorship: 'you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet,' they say. But my girl wasn't an egg. She was just too pretty and that was her only crime. Osvaldo wrote me a letter and then he told me about the *Moonchild* ritual and the Astrum Aureum Society. He also told me all his secrets and asked me not to tell anybody about it. He just realized that all the doctrines of the brotherhood and all their rituals were just bullshit. But he still needed the network to survive in the United States. Then was when I knew how he joined them. You know, the story of the pin that Mercedes bought in the flea market."

"Did you ever told anybody about Osvaldo being an impostor?"

“Osvaldo was the first man who didn’t treat me as if I was a child, Arturo, and if I am a loyal woman even in my infidelity, I would be loyal the most to my daughter’s love of her life. We remained friends until he died. He didn’t tell me that he was dying, but that is understandable.” She stopped a moment. “Now I believe that the reason I hated Felipe was precisely that he treated me always like a child. The second man who treated me as an adult person and as a woman was Rafael. His age matched much better with mine. He died two years after Felipe; he was 79 and a few years after Mercedes died at 82. Some feminists celebrate the fact that women live longer than men. Personally I think that it is a curse. Mercedes died at a decent age and then I remained like a freak and lonely immortal. My nephews and my nieces take care of me because they think I am stuffed with money and it’s true. I hate them, but in my old age I need them. It is just another quid pro quo.”

Rosa came back before anybody called her. When she opened the door, Cristina and I laughed with complicity. I understood why Osvaldo remained a friend for his whole life with this woman: she had some inner youth that would never grow old.

I said goodbye, but I went to see her two times before coming back to the United States. When I already was back in DC, she sent me some letters that were a delightful archaism in the email era. Amazingly she finally learned to how use Facebook. Maybe the secret for her longevity was that she never stopped learning, and maybe those stupid books of self-help of the eighties were right after all.

In the lobby of her building I asked the doorman to take care of my stuff while I went to buy a suitcase.

“Would a big backpack be ok?” he asked me and I nodded.

The only store where I could buy a suitcase nearby was a designer’s store and the prices would be stratospheric. The guy came with a backpack and put my stuff inside, including my Ukiyo-e portfolio and the red box with Osvaldo’s letters. I paid him twenty thousand pesos (forty dollars) for the backpack and I put it on my back. I didn’t use the recorder this time. I think with Caroline it was just a way to be sure that our meeting was just business. With Cristina I didn’t even take notes. I only take notes to remember phone numbers, names, or directions, and those were just the kind of details I had to avoid. Nevertheless, I had her words engraved on my mind forever. Turning off my cellphone was my only preparation; a lost call was the only new surprise after I turned it back on. I didn’t recognize the number. That was just because all communications with Chile were by Internet. I called the number and it happened to be my cousin Rodolfo, who was inviting me to the place where we used to gather to drink when I lived in Chile. I said yes, of course, and I left the building that looked like a ship. Outside there was a familiar and unpleasant smell. It was the tear gas that the Chilean government still uses to control the people. It smells like super glue. They were using it at some distance, but it was still disgusting. Fortunately a taxi passed and I stopped it. I got in the car quickly and I closed the door.

“Where to, sir?” another middle-aged cab driver asked me.

“To Providencia and Manuel Montt, please.”

“It going to take a while, sir,” he told me, “the traffic is being detoured because of the protests.”

“Just do your best, my friend. People have the right to ask for what is fair and equality is always fair.”

“The problem of this country is that those rich believe that they’re better than us just because they were born rich!” The cab began to go and the driver started to complain about the government. Complaining is a Chilean cab driver’s hobby. For some reason I was in an excellent mood and thirsty.

Washington DC, 2012