

R O B E R T O
B O L A Ñ O

Translated by CHRIS ANDREWS

THE INSUFFERABLE
GAUCHO



The Insufferable Gaucho

ROBERTO BOLAÑO

Translated from the Spanish by Chris Andrews



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For my children Lautaro and Alexander
and for my friend Ignacio Echevarria

So perhaps we shall not miss so very much after all.

—Franz Kafka

JIM

Many years ago I had a friend named Jim, and he was the saddest North American I've ever come across. I've seen a lot of desperate men. But never one as sad as Jim. Once he went to Peru—supposedly for more than six months, but it wasn't long before I saw him again. The Mexican street kids used to ask him, what's poetry made of, Jim? Listening to them, Jim would stare at the clouds and then he'd start throwing up. Vocabulary, eloquence, the search for truth, Epiphany. Like when you have a vision of the Virgin. He was mugged several times in Central America, which is surprising, because he'd been a Marine and fought in Vietnam. No more fighting, Jim used to say. I'm a poet now, searching for the extraordinary, trying to express it in ordinary, everyday words. So you think there are ordinary, everyday words? I think there are, Jim used to say. His wife was a Chicana poet; every so often she'd threaten to leave him. He showed me a photo of her. She wasn't especially pretty. Her face betrayed suffering, and under that suffering, simmering rage. I imagined her in an apartment in San Francisco or a house in Los Angeles, with the windows shut and the curtains open, sitting at a table, eating sliced bread and a bowl of green soup. Jim liked dark women, apparently, history's secret women, he would say, without elaborating. As for me, I liked blondes. Once I saw him watching fire-eaters on a street in Mexico City. I saw him from behind, and I didn't say hello, but it was obviously Jim. The badly cut hair, the dirty white shirt and the stoop, as if he were still weighed down by his pack. Somehow his neck, his red neck, summoned up the image of a lynching in the country—a landscape in black and white, without billboards or gas station lights—the country as it is or ought to be: one expanse of idle land blurring into the next, brick-walled rooms or bunkers from which we have escaped, standing there, awaiting our return. Jim had his hands in his pockets. The fire-eater was waving his torch and laughing fiercely. His blackened face was ageless: he could have been thirty-five or fifteen. He wasn't wearing a shirt and there was a vertical scar from his navel to his breastbone. Every so often he'd fill his mouth with flammable liquid and spit out a long snake of fire. The people in the street would watch him for a while, admire his skill, and continue on their way, except for Jim, who remained there on the edge of the sidewalk, stock-still, as if he expected something more from the fire-eater, a tenth signal (having deciphered the usual nine), or as if he'd seen in the fire-eater's discolored face the features of an old friend or of someone he'd killed. I watched him for a good long while. I was eighteen or nineteen at the time and believed I was immortal. If I realized that I wasn't, I would have turned around and walked away. After a while I got tired of looking at Jim's back and the fire-eater's grimaces. So I went over and called his name. Jim didn't seem to hear me. When he turned around I noticed that his face was covered with sweat. He seemed to be feverish, and it took him a while to work out who I was; he greeted me with a nod and then turned back to the fire-eater. Standing beside him, I noticed he was

crying. He probably had a fever as well. I also discovered something that surprised me less the time than it does now, writing this: the fire-eater was performing exclusively for Jim, as all the other passersby on that corner in Mexico City simply didn't exist. Sometimes the flame came within a yard of where we were standing. What are you waiting for, I said, you want to get barbecued in the street? It was a stupid wisecrack, I said it without thinking, but then it hit me: that's exactly what Jim's waiting for. That year, I seem to remember, there was a song they kept playing in some of the funkier places with a refrain that went, *Chingado, hechizado* (*Fucked up, spellbound*). That was Jim: fucked up and spellbound. Mexico's spell had bound him and now he was looking his demons right in the face. Let's get out of here, I said. I also asked him if he was high, or feeling ill. He shook his head. The fire-eater was staring at us. Then, with his cheeks puffed out like Aeolus, the god of the winds, he began to approach us. In a fraction of a second I realized that it wasn't a gust of wind we'd be getting. Let's go, I said, and yanked Jim away from the fatal edge of that sidewalk. We took ourselves off down the street toward Reforma, and after a while we went our separate ways. Jim didn't say a word in all that time. I never saw him again.

THE INSUFFERABLE GAUCHO

for Rodrigo Fresca

In the opinion of those who knew him well, Manuel Pereda had two outstanding virtues: he was a caring and affectionate father, and an irreproachable lawyer with a record of honesty, in a time and place that were hardly conducive to such rectitude. As a result of the first virtue, his son and daughter, Bebe and Cuca, whose childhood and adolescent years had been happy, later accused him of having sheltered them from the harsh realities of life, focusing their attack particularly on his handling of practical matters. Of his work as a lawyer, there is little to be said. He prospered and made more friends than enemies, which was no mean feat, and when he had the choice between becoming a judge or a candidate for a political party, he chose the bench without hesitation, although it obviously meant giving up the opportunities for greater financial gain that would have been open to him in politics.

After three years, however, disappointed by his judicial career, he gave up public life and spent some time, perhaps even years, reading and traveling. Naturally there was also a Mrs. Pereda, née Hirschman, with whom the lawyer was, so they say, madly in love. There are photos from the time to prove it: in one of them, Pereda, in a black suit, is dancing a tango with a blonde, almost platinum blonde, woman, who is looking at the camera and smiling while the lawyer's eyes remain fixed on her, like the eyes of a sleepwalker or a sheep. Unfortunately, Mrs. Pereda died suddenly, when Cuca was five and Bebe was seven. The young widower never remarried, although there were various women in his social circle with whom he was known to maintain friendly (though never intimate) relations, and who had, moreover, all the qualities required to become the new Mrs. Pereda.

When the lawyer's two or three close friends asked him why he remained single, his response was always that he didn't want to impose the unbearable burden (as he put it) of a stepmother on his offspring. In Pereda's opinion, most of Argentina's recent problems could be traced back to the figure of the stepmother. As a nation, we never had a mother, he would say, or she was never there, or she left us on the doorstep of the orphanage. But we've had plenty of stepmothers, of all sorts, starting with the great Peronist stepmother. And he would conclude: In Latin America, when it comes to stepmothers, we're the experts.

In spite of everything, his life was happy. It's hard not to be happy, he used to say, in Buenos Aires, which is a perfect blend of Paris and Berlin, although if you look closely it's more like a perfect blend of Lyon and Prague. Every day he got up at the same time as his children, had breakfast with them, and dropped them off at school. He spent the rest of the morning reading at least two newspapers; and, after a snack at eleven (consisting basically of cold cuts and sausage on buttered French bread and two or three little glasses of Argentine

Chilean wine, except on special occasions, when the wine was, naturally, French), he took siesta until one. His lunch, which he ate on his own in an enormous, empty dining room while reading a book under the absent-minded gaze of the elderly maid, and watched by the black and-white eyes of his deceased wife, looking out from photographs in ornate silver frames, was light: soup, a small portion of fish and mashed potato, some of which he would leave to go cold. In the afternoon, he helped his children with their homework, or sat through Cuca's piano lessons in silence, or Bebe's English and French classes, given by two teachers with Italian surnames, who came to the house. Sometimes, when Cuca had learned to play a piece right through, the maid and the cook would come to listen, and the lawyer, filled with pride, would hear them murmur words of praise, which struck him at first as excessive, but then, in reflection, seemed perfectly apt. After saying good night to his children and reminding his domestic staff for the umpteenth time not to open the door to anyone, he would go to his favorite café, on Corrientes, where he would stay until one at the very latest, listening to his friends or friends of theirs discussing issues that he would have found supremely boring, had he suspected, had he known anything about them, after which he would go home, where everyone, by that time, was asleep.

Eventually the children grew up. First Cuca got married and went to live in Rio de Janeiro, then Bebe started writing and indeed became a highly successful writer, which was a source of great pride for Pereda, who read each and every page his son published. Bebe went on living at home for a few more years (where else could he have had it so good?), after which, like his sister, he flew the coop.

At first the lawyer tried to resign himself to solitude. He had an affair with a widow, went on a long trip through France and Italy, met a girl called Rebeca, and finally contented himself with organizing his huge, chaotic library. When Bebe came back from the United States, where he had spent a year teaching at a university, Pereda had aged prematurely. Bebe was worried and tried to spend as much time as he could with his father, so sometimes they went to the movies or the theater, where the lawyer would usually fall into a deep sleep, and sometimes Bebe dragged him along (though he only had to drag him at first) to the literary gatherings held in a café called El Lapiz Negro, where authors basking in the glory of some municipal prize held forth at length about the nation's destiny. Pereda, who never opened his mouth at those gatherings, began to take an interest in what his son's colleagues had to say. When they talked about literature, he was completely bored. In his opinion, the best Argentine writers were Borges and his son; any further commentary on that subject was superfluous. But when they talked about national and international politics, the lawyer's body grew tense, as if under the effect of an electric current. From then on, his daily habits changed. He began to get up early and look through the old books in his library, searching for something, though he couldn't have said what. He spent his mornings reading. He decided to give up wine and heavy meals, because he realized they were dulling his intellect. His personal hygiene also underwent a change. He no longer spruced himself up when he was going out. He soon stopped taking a daily shower. One day he went to read the paper in a park without putting on a tie. His old friends barely recognized this new Pereda as the lawyer they had known, who had been irreproachable in every respect. One day he woke up feeling more agitated than usual. He had lunch with a retired judge and a retired journalist, and laughed all the way

through the meal. Afterward, while they were drinking cognac, the judge asked him what he found so funny. Buenos Aires is sinking, Pereda replied. The ex-journalist thought that the lawyer had gone crazy and recommended some time by the seaside: the beach, the invigorating air. The judge, less given to speculation, simply thought that Pereda had gone on a tangent.

A few days later, however, the Argentine economy collapsed. Accounts in American dollars were frozen, and those who hadn't moved their capital (or their savings) offshore suddenly discovered that they had nothing left, except perhaps a few bonds and bank bills—just looking at them was enough to give you goosebumps—vague promises inspired in equal parts by some forgotten tango and the words of the national anthem. I told you so, said the lawyer to anyone who would listen. Then, accompanied by his cook and maid, he stood in long lines like many other inhabitants of Buenos Aires, and entered into long conversations with strangers (who struck him as utterly charming) in streets thronged with people swindled by the government or the banks, or some other culprit.

When the President resigned, Pereda was there among the protestors as they banged their pots and pans. It wasn't the only demonstration. Sometimes it seemed that the elderly had taken control of the streets, old people of all social classes, and he liked that, although he didn't know why; it seemed like a sign that something was changing, that something was moving in the darkness, although he was also happy to join in the wildcat strikes and blockades that soon degenerated into brawling. In the space of a few days, Argentina had three different Presidents. It didn't occur to anyone to start a revolution, or mount a military coup. That was when Pereda decided to go back to the country.

Before leaving, he explained his plan to the maid and the cook. Buenos Aires is falling apart; I'm going to the ranch, he said. They talked for hours, sitting at the kitchen table. The cook had been to the ranch as often as Pereda, who in the past had always said that the country was no place for a man like him, a cultivated family man, who wanted to make sure that his children got a good education. His mental images of the ranch had blurred and faded, leaving only a house with a hole in the middle, an enormous, threatening tree, and a barn whose dim interior flickered with shadows that might have been rats. Nevertheless, that night as he drank tea in the kitchen, he told his employees that he had hardly any money left for their wages (it was all frozen in the bank—in other words, as good as lost), and the only solution he could think of was to take them to the country, where at least they wouldn't be short of food, or so he liked to think.

The maid and the cook listened to him compassionately. At one point the lawyer burst into tears. Trying to console him, they told him not to worry about the money; they were prepared to go on working even if he couldn't pay them. The lawyer definitively rejected any such arrangement. I'm too old to become a pimp, he said with an apologetic smile. The next morning, he packed a suitcase and took a taxi to the station. The women waved goodbye from the sidewalk.

The long, monotonous train trip gave him ample time for reflection. At first, the carriage was full. He observed that there were basically two topics of conversation: the country's state of bankruptcy and how the Argentine team was shaping up for the World Cup in Korea and Japan. The press of passengers reminded him of the trains departing from Moscow in the fall

Doctor Zhivago, which he had seen some time before, except that in the Russian carriages and the film directed by that English director, the talk was not about ice hockey or skiing. What hope have we got, he thought, although he had to agree that on paper the Argentine selection looked unbeatable. When night fell, the conversations petered out, and the lawyer thought of his children, Cuca and Bebe, both of them abroad; he was also surprised to find himself remembering a number of women with whom he had been intimately acquainted; quietly they emerged from oblivion, their skin covered with perspiration, infusing his restless spirit with a kind of serenity, although it wasn't altogether serene, perhaps not exactly a sense of adventure, but something like that.

Then the train began to advance across the pampas, and the lawyer leaned his head against the cold glass of the window and fell asleep.

When he woke, the carriage was half empty and there was a man who looked part Indian sitting beside him, reading a Batman comic. Where are we? asked Pereda. In Coronel Gutiérrez, said the man. Ah, that's all right, thought the lawyer, I'm going to Capitán Jourdan. Then he got up, stretched his legs, and sat down again. Out on the dry plain he saw a rabbit that seemed to be racing the train. There were five other rabbits running behind it. The first rabbit, running just outside the window, had wide-open eyes, as if the race against the train required a superhuman effort (super-leporine, actually, thought the lawyer). The rabbits in pursuit, on the other hand, seemed to be running in tandem, like cyclists in the Tour de France. With a couple of big leaps, the rabbit bringing up the rear relieved the front-runner who dropped back to last position, while the third rabbit moved up to second place, and the fourth moved up to third; and all the while the group was closing in on the solitary rabbit running beside the lawyer's window. Rabbits, he thought, how wonderful! On the plains there was nothing else to be seen: a vast, boundless expanse of scanty grass under massive, low clouds, and no indication that a town might be near. Are you going to Capitán Jourdan? Pereda asked the Batman reader, who seemed to be examining every panel with extreme care, scrutinizing every detail, as if he were visiting a portable museum. No, he replied, I'm getting off at El Apeadero. Pereda tried to remember a station of that name but couldn't. And what's that, a station or a factory? The guy with the Indian look stared back at him fixedly: a station, he replied. He seems annoyed, thought Pereda. It wasn't the sort of question he would normally have asked, given his habitual discretion. The pampas had made him inquisitive in that frank, manly, and down-to-earth way, he thought.

When he rested his forehead against the window again, he saw that the rabbits in pursuit had caught up with the lone racing rabbit, and were attacking it ferociously, tearing at its body with their claws and teeth, those long rodents' teeth, thought Pereda with a horrified frisson. He looked back and saw a bundle of tawny fur thrashing about beside the rails.

The only passengers who got off at the station in Capitán Jourdan were Pereda and a woman with two children. The platform was half wood, half cement, and in spite of his best efforts Pereda couldn't find a railway employee anywhere. The woman and the children set off walking on a cart track, and although they were clearly moving away and their figures were visibly shrinking, it took more than three quarters of an hour, according to the lawyer's reckoning, for them to disappear over the horizon. Is the earth round? Pereda wondered. Of course it is, he told himself, as he settled down for a lengthy wait on an old wooden bench.

against the wall of the station offices. Inevitably, he remembered Borges's story "The South" and when he thought of the store mentioned in the final paragraphs, tears brimmed in his eyes. Then he remembered the plot of Bebe's last novel, and imagined his son writing on a computer, in an austere office at a Midwestern university. When Bebe comes back and finds out I've gone to the ranch . . . , he thought in enthusiastic anticipation. The glare and the warm breeze blowing off the plain made him drowsy; he fell asleep. A hand shook him awake. A man as old as he was, wearing a worn-out railway uniform, asked him what he was doing there. Pereda said he was the owner of the Alamo Negro ranch. The man stood there looking at him for a while, then said: The judge. That's right, replied Pereda, there was a time when I was a judge. Don't you remember me, Mister Judge? Pereda scrutinized the man: he needed a new uniform and a haircut, urgently. Pereda shook his head. I'm Severo Infante, said the man. We used to play together when we were kids. But, *che*, that's ages ago—how could I remember, Pereda retorted, and the sound of his voice, not to mention the words he had used, sounded odd, as if the air of Capitán Jourdan had invigorated his vocal chords or his throat.

Of course, you're right, Mister Judge, said Severo Infante, but I feel like celebrating anyway. Bouncing like a kangaroo, the station employee disappeared into the ticket office and then came out with a bottle and a glass. Your health, he said, handing Pereda the glass, which he half filled with a clear liquid that seemed to be pure alcohol. Pereda took a sip—tasted of scorched earth and stones—and left the glass on the bench. He said he had given up drinking. Then he got up and asked the way to his ranch. They went out the back door. Capitán Jourdan is over there, said Severo, just beyond the dry pond. Alamo Negro is the other way, a bit further, but you can't get lost in the daylight. You look after yourself, said Pereda, and set off in the direction of his ranch.

The main house was almost in ruins. That night it was cold, and Pereda tried to gather some sticks and light a campfire, but he couldn't find anything to burn, and in the end he wrapped himself up in his overcoat, rested his head on his suitcase, and told himself, as he fell asleep, that tomorrow would be another day. He woke with the first light of dawn. There was still water in the well, although the bucket had disappeared and the rope was rotten. I need to buy a rope and a bucket, he thought. For breakfast he ate what was left of a pack of peanuts he had bought on the train. He inspected the multitudinous low-ceilinged rooms of the ranch house. Then he set off for Capitán Jourdan, and was surprised to see rabbits but no cattle on the way. He observed them uneasily. Occasionally they would hop toward him, but he only had to wave his arms to make them disappear. Although he had never been particularly keen on guns, he would have been glad of one then. Apart from that, the walk was pleasant: the air was fresh, the sky was clear; it was neither hot nor cold. From time to time he spotted a tree all alone out on the plain, and the vision struck him as poetic, as if the trees and the austere scenery of the deserted countryside had been arranged just for him, and had been awaiting his arrival with an imperturbable patience.

None of the roads in Capitán Jourdan were paved and the housefronts were thickly coated with dust. As he entered the town, he saw a man asleep beside some flowerpots containing plastic flowers. My god, it's so shabby! he thought. The main square was broad, and the town hall, built of brick, gave the collection of squat, derelict buildings a vague air of civilization. He

asked a gardener who was sitting in the square smoking a cigarette where he could find a hardware store. The gardener looked at him curiously, then accompanied him to the door of the only hardware store in town. The owner, an Indian, sold him all the rope he had in stock—forty yards of braided hemp, which Pereda examined at length, as if looking for loose threads. Put it on my account, he said when he had decided what to buy. The Indian looked at him nonplussed. Whose account? he asked. Manuel Pereda's, said Pereda, as he piled up his new possessions in a corner of the store. Then he asked the Indian where he could buy a horse. There are no horses left here, he said, only rabbits. Pereda thought it was a joke and responded with a quick, dry laugh. The gardener, who was looking in from the threshold, said there might be a strawberry roan to be had at Don Dulce's ranch. Pereda asked him how he could get there, and the gardener walked a couple of blocks with him, to a vacant lot full of rubble. Beyond lay open country.

The ranch was called Mi Paraíso and it didn't seem to be as run down as Alamo Negro. A few chickens were pecking around in the yard. The door to the shed had been pulled off its hinges and someone had propped it against a wall nearby. Some Indian-looking kids were playing with bolas. A woman came out of the main house and said good afternoon. Pereda asked her for a glass of water. Between mouthfuls he asked if there was a horse for sale. You'll have to wait for the boss, said the woman, and went back into the house. Pereda sat down beside the well and kept himself busy brushing away the flies that were buzzing around everywhere, as if the yard were used for pickling meat, thought Pereda, although the onions and pickles he knew were the ones he used to buy many years ago at a store that imported them directly from England. After an hour, he heard the sound of a jeep and stood up.

Don Dulce was a little pink-faced guy, with blue eyes, wearing a short-sleeved shirt, even though, by the time he arrived, it was starting to get cold. From the jeep emerged an even shorter guy: a gaucho attired in baggy *bombachas* and a diaper-like *chiripá*, who threw Pereda a sidelong glance and started carrying rabbit skins into the shed. Pereda introduced himself. He said he was the owner of Alamo Negro and that he was planning to do some work on the ranch and needed to buy a horse. Don Dulce invited him to dinner. Around the table sat the host, the woman who had appeared earlier, the children, the gaucho, and Pereda. There was a fire in the hearth, not to heat the room but for grilling meat. The bread was hard and unleavened, the way the Jews make it, thought Pereda, remembering his Jewish wife with a twinge of nostalgia. But no one at Mi Paraíso seemed to be Jewish. Don Dulce spoke like a local, although Pereda did notice a few expressions that were typical of the Buenos Aires lingo, as if his host had grown up in Villa Luro and hadn't been living on the pampas all that long.

When it came to buying the horse, everything went smoothly. Choosing was not a problem, because there was only one horse for sale. When Pereda said he might need a month to pay, Don Dulce didn't object, although the gaucho, who hadn't said a word through the meal, stared at the newcomer warily. They saddled the horse, showed the guest his way home, and said goodbye.

How long has it been since I rode a horse? Pereda wondered. For a few seconds he worried that his bones, accustomed to the comfort of Buenos Aires and its armchairs, might break under the strain. The night was dark as pitch or coal. Stupid expressions, though

Pereda. European nights might be pitch-dark or coal-black, but not American nights, which are dark like a void, where there's nothing to hold on to, no shelter from the elements, just empty, storm-whipped space, above and below. May the rain fall soft on you, he heard Dulce shout. God willing, he replied from the darkness.

On the way back to his ranch, he dozed off a couple of times. The first time he saw armchairs raining down over a city, which he eventually recognized as Buenos Aires. Suddenly the armchairs burst into flames, lighting up the city sky as they burned. The other time he saw himself on horseback, with his father, riding away from Alamo Negro. His father seemed to be sad. When will we come back? asked the young Pereda. Never again, Manuelito, said his father. He woke up from this second nap in one of the streets of Capitán Jourdan. He saw a corner store that was open. He heard voices, and someone strumming a guitar, tuning it but never settling on a particular song to play, just as he had read in Borges. For a moment he thought that his destiny, his screwed-up American destiny, would be to meet his death like Dahlman in "The South," and it seemed wrong, partly because he now had debts to repay, and partly because he wasn't ready to die, although Pereda was aware that no one is ever ready for death. Seized by a sudden inspiration, he entered the store on horseback. Inside he found an old gaucho strumming the guitar, the barman, and three younger guys sitting at a table, who started when they saw the horse come in. Pereda was inwardly satisfied by the thought that the scene was like something from a story by Benedetto. Nevertheless, he set his face and approached the zinc-topped bar. He ordered a glass of eau-de-vie, which he drank with one hand, while in the other he held his riding crop discreetly out of view, since he hadn't yet acquired the traditional sheath knife. He asked the barman to put the drink on his account, and on his way out, as he passed the young gauchos, he told them to move aside because he was going to spit. It was meant as a reaffirmation of authority, but before the gauchos could grasp what was happening, the virulent gob of phlegm had flown from his lips; they barely had time to jump. May the rain fall soft on you, he said before disappearing into the darkness of Capitán Jourdan.

From then on, Pereda went into town each day on his horse, which he named José Bianco. He often went to buy tools with which to repair the ranch house, but he also passed the time of day chatting with the gardener, or with the keepers of the general store and the hardware store, whose livelihoods he diminished day by day, as he added to the accounts he had with each of them. Other gauchos and storekeepers soon joined in these conversations and sometimes even children came to hear the stories Pereda told. The stories, of course, portrayed the teller in a favorable light, although they weren't exactly cheerful. For example he told them how he had once owned a horse very like José Bianco, which had been killed in a confrontation with the police. Luckily I was a judge, he said, and when the police come up against a judge or an ex-judge, they usually back off.

Police work's about order, he said, while judges defend justice. Do you see the difference, boys? The gauchos would usually nod, although not all of them were sure just what he was talking about.

Sometimes he went to the station, where his friend Severo would reminisce at length about their childhood pranks. Although Pereda was privately convinced that he couldn't have been as silly as he came across in those stories, he let Severo talk until he was tired or full.

asleep, then walked out onto the platform to wait for the train and the letter it should have been bringing.

Finally the letter arrived. In it, his cook explained that life was hard in Buenos Aires, but that he shouldn't worry, because both she and the maid were going to the house every two days, and it was in perfect order. With the crisis, some apartments in the neighborhood suddenly seemed to have given way to entropy, but his was as clean, as stately and as comfortable as ever, perhaps even more so, since the usual wear and tear had slowed down to a standstill. Then she went on to relate various pieces of news about the neighbors, gossiped with fatalism, since they all felt cheated and no one could see a light at the end of the tunnel. The cook said it was all down to the Peronists, that pack of thieves, while the maid was more sweeping: she blamed all the politicians, and the Argentine people in general; they had been as docile as sheep, and now they were getting what they deserved. As to sending him money, both of them were looking into it, she assured him; the problem was, they still hadn't figured out how to make sure it wouldn't be filched by some racketeer on the way.

In the evening, as he was returning to Alamo Negro at a gallop, the lawyer could sometimes see a far-off village in ruins that didn't seem to have been there before. Sometimes a slender column of smoke rose from the village and dissipated in the vast sky over the plains. Occasionally he encountered the vehicle in which Don Dulce and his gaucho got around. They would stop to talk and smoke for a while, Don Dulce and the gaucho sitting in their jeep, the lawyer still mounted on José Bianco. Don Dulce was out after rabbits. Pereda once asked him how he hunted them, and Don Dulce told his gaucho to show the lawyer one of the traps, which was half-way between a bird cage and a rat trap. In any case, Pereda never saw a single rabbit in the jeep, only the skins, because the gaucho skinned them on the spot, beside the traps. After those chats, Pereda always felt that Don Dulce was somehow debasing the nation. Rabbit hunting! What sort of job is that for a gaucho? he asked himself. Then he would give his horse an affectionate pat, Come on, *che*, José Bianco, let's go, he would say, and head back to the ranch.

One day the cook turned up. She had brought money for him. She rode behind him on José Bianco half way from the station to the ranch, then they walked the rest of the way, in silence, contemplating the plains. By this stage the ranch house was more comfortable than it had been when Pereda arrived; they ate rabbit stew, and then, by the light of an oil lamp, the cook handed over the money she had brought, and explained where it had come from, which objects from the house she had been forced to sell off at fraction of their value. Pereda didn't even bother to count the bills. The next morning, when he woke up, he saw that the cook had worked all night cleaning up some of the rooms. He reproached her gently. Don Manuel, she said, it's like a pigsty here.

Two days later, in spite of the lawyer's entreaties, she took the train back to Buenos Aires. When I'm away from Buenos Aires I feel like another person, she explained to him as they waited on the platform, just the two of them. And I'm too old to become someone else. Women, they're all the same, thought Pereda. Everything is changing, the cook explained to him. The city was full of beggars, and respectable people were organizing neighborhood soup kitchens just to have something to put in their stomachs. There must have been ten different kinds of currency, not counting the official money. No one was bored. People were desperate

but not bored. As she spoke, Pereda was watching the rabbits that had appeared on the other side of the tracks. The rabbits looked at them, then bounded away across the plain. Sometimes it's as if the country round here were crawling with lice or fleas, thought the lawyer. With the money the cook had brought, he paid his debts and hired a pair of gauchos to repair the roof of the ranch house, which was falling in. The problem was that he knew next to nothing about carpentry, and the gauchos knew even less.

One was called José and must have been around seventy. He didn't have a horse. The other was called Campodónico and was probably younger, though maybe not. Both wore the traditional baggy *bombachas*, but their headgear consisted of caps they had made themselves from rabbit skins. Neither had a family, so after a while they both came to live at Alamo Negro. At night, by the light of a fire out in the open, Pereda whiled away the time recounting adventures that had taken place exclusively in his imagination. He spoke to them of Argentina, Buenos Aires, and the pampas, and he asked them which one of the three they would choose. Argentina's like a novel, he said, a lie, or make-believe at best. Buenos Aires is full of crooks and loudmouths, a hellish place, with nothing to recommend it except the women, and some of the writers, but only a few. Ah, but the pampas—the pampas are eternal. A limitless cemetery, that's what they're like. Can you imagine that, boys, a limitless cemetery? The gauchos smiled and confessed that it was pretty hard to imagine something like that, since cemeteries are for humans, and although the number of humans is big, there is a limit to it. Ah, but the cemetery I'm talking about, said Pereda, is an exact copy of eternity.

With the money he had left, he went to Coronel Gutiérrez and bought himself a mare and a colt. The mare would let itself be ridden, but the colt was not much use for anything and had to be treated with extreme caution. Sometimes, in the evening, when he was sick of working or sitting around, Pereda went into Capitán Jourdan with his gauchos. He rode José Bianco and the gauchos rode the mare. When he entered the store a respectful hush would fall over the clients, some playing cards, others playing draughts. When the mayor, who was prone to depression, turned up, there would always be four brave volunteers for a game of Monopoly that lasted until dawn. The habit of playing games (not to speak of Monopoly) seemed ill bred and dishonorable to Pereda. A store is a place where people converse or listen in silence to the conversations of others, he thought. A store is like an empty classroom. A store is a smoky church.

Some nights, especially when gauchos from out of town or some disoriented traveling salesman turned up, Pereda felt a powerful desire to start a fight. Nothing serious, just a scrap, but with real knives, not chalked sticks. Other nights he would fall asleep between his two gauchos and dream that his wife was leading their children by the hand and scolding him for the way he had let himself lapse into brutishness. And what about the rest of the country, replied the lawyer. But that's no excuse, *che*, rejoined Mrs. Pereda, née Hirschman. At which point the lawyer was obliged to agree, with tears welling up in his eyes.

In general, however, his dreams were peaceful, and when he woke up in the morning he was in good spirits and keen to start work. Although, to tell the truth, not a lot of work was done at Alamo Negro. The repairing of the ranch house roof was a disaster. In order to start the kitchen garden, the lawyer and Campodónico bought seeds in Coronel Gutiérrez, but the earth, it seemed, would accept no foreign seed. For a time, the lawyer tried to get the co

which he called "my stud horse," to cover the mare. If the mare had a filly, all the better. The way, he imagined, he could soon build up a breeding stock that would lead the recovery; but the colt didn't seem to be interested in covering the mare, and although he searched for miles around, Pereda couldn't find a sire, since the gauchos had sold their horses to the slaughterhouse, and now got around on foot, or on bicycles, or hitched rides on the endless dirt tracks of the pampas.

We have fallen, we're down, Pereda would say to his audience, but we can still pick ourselves up and go to our deaths like men. He too had to set rabbit traps to survive. In the evenings, when he left the house with his men, he would often let José and Campodónico empty the traps, along with a new recruit known as The Old Guy, while he set off alone for the ruined village. There he found some young people, younger than his gauchos, but so nervous and disinclined to converse that it wasn't even worth inviting them for a meal. The wire fences were still standing in some places. Occasionally he would go to the railway line and stay there a long time, without dismounting, he and José Bianco both chewing grass stalks, waiting for the train to pass. And often it didn't, as if that part of Argentina had been erased from memory as well as from the map.

One afternoon, as he was vainly attempting to get his colt to mount the mare, he saw a car driving over the plain, coming directly toward Alamo Negro. The car pulled up in the yard and four men got out. At first he didn't recognize his son. Nor did Bebe realize that the old gaucho in *bombachas* with a beard, long tangled hair, and a bare chest tanned by the sun was his father. Son of my soul, said Pereda, hugging him, blood of my blood, vindication of my day, and he could have gone on like that if Bebe hadn't stopped him to introduce his friends, two writers from Buenos Aires and the publisher Ibarrola, who loved books and nature, and had financed the trip. In honor of his son's guests, that night the lawyer had a big bonfire built in the yard and sent for the foremost of Capitán Jourdan's guitar-strumming gauchos, warning him beforehand that he was to do strictly that: strum, without playing any song in particular, in accordance with the country way.

Campodónico and José were dispatched to fetch ten liters of wine and a liter of eau-de-vie, which they brought back from Capitán Jourdan in the mayor's van. A good supply of rabbits was laid in, and one was roasted for each person present, although the meat didn't seem to find much favor with the visitors from the city. That night there were more than thirty people gathered around the fire, besides Pereda's gauchos and his guests from Buenos Aires. Before the party began, Pereda announced that he didn't want any fighting or unruly behavior, which was quite unnecessary, since the locals were peace-loving people who had steel themselves to kill rabbits. All the same, the lawyer considered setting aside one of the multitudinous rooms so that people could lay down their knives, large and small, before taking part in the festivities, but on reflection he decided that such a measure really would be a little excessive.

By three in the morning the elders had set off back to Capitán Jourdan, and there were just a few young men left at the ranch, wondering what to do, since the food and drink had run out, and the guys from the city had already turned in. The next morning Bebe tried to convince his father to return to Buenos Aires with him. Things are gradually settling down, he said; personally he was doing all right. He gave his father a book, one of the many gifts he

had brought, and told him that it had been published in Spain. Now I'm known throughout Latin America, he explained. But the lawyer had no idea what his son was talking about. He asked if he was married yet, and when Bebe said no, suggested he find himself an Indian woman and come to live at Alamo Negro.

An Indian woman, Bebe repeated in a tone of voice that struck the lawyer as wistful.

Among the gifts his son had brought was a Beretta 92 pistol with two clips and a box of ammunition. The lawyer looked at the pistol in amazement. Do you honestly think I'm going to need it? he asked. You never know. You're really on your own here, said Bebe. Later that morning they saddled up the mare for Ibarrola, who wanted to take a look at the countryside. Pereda accompanied him on José Bianco. For two hours, the publisher held forth in praise of the idyllic, unspoiled life, as he saw it, enjoyed by the inhabitants of Capitán Jourdan. When he spotted the first of the ruined houses, he broke into a gallop, but it was much further away than he had thought, and before he got there, a rabbit leaped up and bit him on the neck. The publisher's cry vanished at once into the vast open space.

From where he was, all Pereda saw was a dark shape springing from the ground, tracing an arc toward the publisher's head, and then disappearing. Dumb-ass Basque, he thought. He spurred José Bianco, and, approaching Ibarrola, saw that he was holding his neck with one hand and covering his face with the other. Without saying a word, Pereda removed the handkerchief from Ibarrola's neck. There was a bleeding scratch under his ear. Pereda asked him if he had a handkerchief. The publisher replied in the affirmative, and only then did Pereda realize that he was crying. Put the handkerchief on the wound, he said. Then he took the mare's reins and they made their way to the ruined house. There was no one there; they didn't dismount. As they returned to the ranch, the handkerchief that Ibarrola was holding against the wound gradually turned red. They said nothing. When they got back, Pereda ordered his gauchos to strip the publisher to the waist, and they flung him onto a table in the yard. Pereda washed the wound, which he proceeded to cauterize with a knife heated until the blade was red-hot. He then made a dressing with another handkerchief, held in place with a makeshift bandage: one of his old shirts, which he soaked in eau-de-vie, what little was left, more as a ritual than as a sanitary measure, but it couldn't do any harm.

When Bebe and the two writers came back from a walk around Capitán Jourdan, they found Ibarrola still unconscious on the table, and Pereda sitting beside him in a chair, observing him intently like a medical student. Behind Pereda, equally absorbed by the sight of the wounded man, stood the ranch's three gauchos.

The sun was beating down mercilessly in the yard. Son of a bitch! shouted one of Bebe's friends, your dad's gone and killed our publisher. But the publisher wasn't dead, and made a full recovery, except for the scar, which he would later display with pride, explaining that it had been caused by the bite of a jumping snake and the subsequent cauterization; he even said he felt better than ever, although he did return to Buenos Aires that night with the writers.

From then on, there were often visitors from the city. Sometimes Bebe came on his own with his riding clothes and his notebooks, in which he wrote vaguely melancholic stories with vaguely crime-related plots. Sometimes he would come with Buenos Aires luminaries, usually writers, but quite often a painter, which pleased Pereda, since painters, for some reason, seemed to know much more about carpentry and brick-laying than the bunch of gauchos who

hung around Alamo Negro all day like a bad smell.

On one occasion Bebe came with a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist was blonde and had steely blue eyes and high cheekbones, like an extra from the Ring cycle. The only problem with her, according to Pereda, was that she talked a lot. One morning he invited her to go for a ride. The psychiatrist accepted. He saddled up the mare, mounted José Bianco, and they headed west. As they rode, the psychiatrist talked about her job in a Buenos Aires mental hospital. She told him (and the rabbits that surreptitiously accompanied them for parts of the way) that people were becoming more and more unbalanced—studies had proven it—which led the psychiatrist to conjecture that perhaps mental instability was not so much a disease as a stratum of normality, just below the surface of normality as it was commonly conceived. All this sounded like Chinese to Pereda, but intimidated as he was by the beauty of his son-in-law's guest, he refrained from saying so. At midday they stopped for a lunch of rabbit jerky and wine. The wine and the meat, a dark meat that shone like alabaster when touched by light and seemed to be literally seething with protein, fuelled the psychiatrist's poetic streak, and, as Pereda noticed out of the corner of his eye, prompted her to let her hair down.

She began quoting lines from Hernández and Lugones in a well-modulated voice. She wondered aloud where Sarmiento had gone wrong. She ran through lists of books and deeds while the horses trotted imperturbably westward, to places Pereda himself had never reached on previous excursions but was glad to visit in such fine although occasionally tiresome company. At about five in the afternoon, they spotted the shell of a ranch house on the horizon. Enthused, they spurred their mounts in that direction, but at six they were still not there, which led the psychiatrist to remark on how deceptive distances could be. When they finally arrived, five or six malnourished children came out to greet them, and a woman wearing a very wide skirt that bulged voluminously, as if there were some kind of animal under it coiled around her legs. The children kept their eyes fixed on the psychiatrist, who adopted a maternal attitude, though not for long, since she soon noticed, as she later explained to Pereda, a malevolent intention in their gaze, a mischievous plan formulated, so she felt, in a language full of consonants, yelps, and grudges.

Pereda, who was coming to the conclusion that the psychiatrist was not entirely in her right mind, accepted the skirted woman's hospitality, and during the meal, which they ate in a room full of old photographs, he learned that the owners of the ranch had gone off to the city a long time ago (she couldn't say which city), and the laborers, having ceased to receive their monthly pay-packet, had gradually drifted away too. The woman also told them about a river and flooding, although Pereda had no idea where the river could be, and no one in Capitán Jourdan had mentioned any kind of flooding. Predictably, they ate rabbit stew, which the hostess had prepared with an expert hand. As they were getting ready to go, Pereda pointed out the way to Alamo Negro, his ranch, in case they ever got tired of living out there. I don't pay much, but at least there's company, he said seriously, as if explaining that death came after life. Then he gathered the children around him and proceeded to dispense advice. When he had finished speaking, he saw that the psychiatrist and the skirted woman had fallen asleep on their chairs. Day was about to break when they left. The light of a full moon shimmered on the plain, and from time to time they saw a rabbit jump, but Pereda paid no attention, and after a long spell of silence he softly began to sing a song in French that his late

wife had liked.

The song was about a pier and mist, and faithless lovers (as all lovers are in the end, he thought indulgently), and places that remain steadfastly faithful.

Sometimes, as he walked or rode José Bianco around the dubious boundaries of his ranch, Pereda thought that nothing would ever be the same unless the cattle returned. Cowardly, he shouted, where are you?

In winter, the skirted woman turned up at Alamo Negro with the children in tow, and things changed. She was known to some people in Capitán Jourdan and they were pleased to see her again. The woman didn't talk much but there could be no doubt that she worked harder than the six gauchos Pereda had on the payroll at the time, loosely speaking, since he often went for months without paying them. In any case, some of the gauchos had what could be called an idiosyncratic conception of time. They could adapt to a forty-day month without any major headaches. Or to a four-hundred-and-forty day year. None of them, in fact, Pereda included, wanted to think about time. By the fireside, some of the gauchos talked about electroshock therapy, while others spoke like professional sports commentators, except that they were commenting on a match played long ago, when they were twenty or thirty and belonged to some gang of hooligans. Sons of bitches, thought Pereda tenderly, with a man's sort of tenderness, of course.

One night, sick of hearing the old guys rambling on about psychiatric hospitals and slums where parents made their children go without milk so they could travel to support their soccer team in some historic match, he asked them about their political opinions. At first the gauchos were reluctant to talk about politics, but when he finally got them to open up, it turned out that in one way or another, they were all nostalgic for General Perón.

This is where we part company, said Pereda, and pulled out his knife. For a few seconds he thought that the gauchos would do the same and his destiny would be sealed that night, but the old guys recoiled in fear and asked what he was doing, for God's sake. What had he done? What had got into him? The flickering fire threw tiger-like stripes of light across their faces, but, gripping his knife and trembling, Pereda felt that the shame of the nation or the continent had turned them into tame cats. That's why the cattle have been replaced by rabbits, he thought as he turned and walked back to his room.

I'd slaughter the lot of you if you weren't so pathetic, he shouted.

The next morning he was worried that the gauchos might have gone back to Capitán Jourdan, but they were all still there, working in the yard or drinking mate by the fire, as if nothing had happened. A few days later the skirted woman arrived from the ranch out west and Alamo Negro began to change for the better, starting with the food, because the woman knew ten different ways to cook a rabbit, and where to find herbs, and how to start a kitchen garden and grow some fresh vegetables.

One night the woman walked along the veranda and went into Pereda's room. She was wearing only a petticoat; the lawyer made space for her in the bed, and spent the rest of the night looking up at the ceiling and feeling that warm and unfamiliar body against his ribs. Dawn was breaking by the time he fell asleep, and when he woke up, the woman was gone. Get yourself shackled up, said Bebe when his father informed him. Only technically, the lawyer pointed out. By that stage, with money borrowed here and there, he had been able to enlarge

the stables and acquire four cows. When he was bored of an afternoon, he would saddle up José Bianco and take the cows out for a walk. The rabbits, who had never seen a cow in their lives, stared in amazement.

Pereda and the cows looked like they were bound for the ends of the earth, but they had just gone out for a walk.

One morning a doctor and a nurse appeared at Alamo Negro. Having lost their jobs in Buenos Aires, they were working for a Spanish NGO, providing a mobile medical service. The doctor wanted to test the gauchos for hepatitis. When the pair came back a week later, Pereda did his best to put on a feast: rice and rabbit casserole. The doctor said it tasted better than *paella valenciana*, then proceeded to vaccinate all the gauchos free of charge. She gave the cook a bottle of pills and told her to make sure each child took one every morning. Before they left, Pereda asked how his folks were doing health-wise. They're anemic, said the doctor, but no one has Hepatitis B or C. That's a relief, said Pereda. Yes, I guess it is, said the doctor.

As they were getting ready to go, Pereda took a look inside their van. The back was a mess: sleeping bags and boxes full of first-aid supplies: medicines and disinfectants. Where are you going now? he asked. South, said the doctor. Her eyes were red and the lawyer couldn't tell if it was due to lack of sleep or to crying. As the van drove away raising a cloud of dust, he thought he would miss them.

That night he spoke to the gauchos gathered in the general store. I believe we are losing our memory, he said. And just as well too. For once, the gauchos looked at him as if they had a better grasp of what he was saying than he did himself. Shortly afterward, he received a letter from Bebe summoning him to Buenos Aires: he had to sign some papers so that his house could be sold. Should I take the train, Pereda wondered, or ride? That night he could hardly sleep. He imagined people thronging the sidewalks as he made his entry mounted on José Bianco. Cars stopping, dumbstruck policemen, a newspaper vendor smiling, his compatriots playing soccer in vacant lots with the parsimonious movements of the malnourished. Pereda's entry into Buenos Aires, as he imagined the scene, had the ambience of Christ's entry into Jerusalem or Brussels as depicted by Ensor. All of us enter Jerusalem sooner or later, he thought as he tossed and turned. Every single one of us. And some never leave. But most do. And then we are seized and crucified. Especially the poor gauchos.

He also imagined a downtown street, the quintessential Buenos Aires street, with all the charms of the capital; he was riding along it on his trusty José Bianco, while from the windows above white flowers began to rain down. Who was throwing the flowers? He couldn't tell since, like the street itself, the windows of the buildings remained empty. It must be the dead, Pereda supposed drowsily. The dead of Jerusalem and the dead of Buenos Aires.

The next morning he spoke with the skirted woman and the gauchos and told them he would be away for a while. None of them said anything, although that night, at dinner, the woman asked if he was going to Buenos Aires. Pereda nodded. Then take care and may the rain fall soft on you, said the woman.

Two days later, he took the train and went back the way he had come more than three years earlier. When he arrived at Constitución station, a few people stared as if he were wearing fancy dress, but most were not particularly perturbed by an old man attired like

cross between a gaucho and a rabbit trapper. The taxi driver who took him to his apartment inquired where he was from, and when Pereda, lost in his own ruminations, failed to answer, he asked if he spoke Spanish. By way of reply, Pereda pulled out his knife and proceeded to trim his nails, which were as long as a wild cat's.

No one answered the door. The keys were under the mat; he went in. The apartment seemed clean, perhaps even too clean—it smelled of mothballs. Feeling exhausted, Pereda trudged to his bedroom and flopped onto the bed without taking off his boots. When he woke up it was dark. He went into the living room without switching on any lights, and called his cook. First he spoke to her husband, who wanted to know who was calling, and didn't sound very convinced when he identified himself. Then the cook came on. I'm in Buenos Aires, Estela, he said. She didn't seem surprised. When asked if she was happy to know that he was back home, she said: There's always something unexpected happening here. Then he tried to call his maid, but an impersonal, female voice informed him that the number he had dialed was not in service. Feeling dispirited and perhaps hungry, he tried to remember the faces of his employees, but the images he could summon were vague: shadows moving in the hallway, a commotion of clean laundry, murmurs and hushed voices.

The amazing thing is that I can remember their phone numbers, thought Pereda, sitting in the dark living room of his apartment. A little later on he went out. Wandering aimlessly, or so he thought, he ended up at the cafe where Bebe used to meet his artistic and literary friends. From the street he looked into the spacious, well-lit, bustling interior. Bebe and an old man (an old man like me! thought Pereda) were presiding over one of the most animated tables. At another, closer to the window through which Pereda was spying, he noticed a group of writers who looked more like advertising executives. One of them, with an adolescent air, although he was at least fifty and maybe even over sixty, kept putting a white powder up his nose and holding forth about world literature. Suddenly, the eyes of the pseudo-adolescent met Pereda's. For a moment their gazes locked, as if, for each of them, the presence of the other were a gash in the ambient reality. Resolutely and with surprising agility, the writer with the adolescent air sprang to his feet and rushed out into the street. Before Pereda knew what was going on, the writer was upon him.

What are you staring at? he demanded, brushing remnants of white powder from his nose. Pereda looked him up and down. The writer was taller and slimmer and possibly stronger than he was. What are you staring at, you rude old fool? What are you staring at? The pseudo-adolescent's gang was looking on, following the scene as if something similar happened every night.

Pereda realized that he had grasped his knife, and let himself go. He took a step forward and, without anyone noticing that he was armed, planted the point of the blade, though not deeply, in his opponent's groin. Later, he would remember the look of surprise on the writer's face, in which terror was blended with something like reproof, and the words with which he groped for an explanation (Hey, what are you doing, you asshole?), as if there were any way to explain fever and revulsion.

I think you need a napkin, Pereda remarked in a clear strong voice, pointing at his adversary's blood-stained crotch. Mother, said the coke-head, looking down. When he looked up again, he was surrounded by friends and colleagues, but Pereda was gone.

What should I do, the lawyer wondered as he roamed through his beloved city, finding strange and familiar, marvelous and pathetic. Do I stay in Buenos Aires and become champion of justice, or go back to the pampas, where I don't belong, and try to do something useful . . . I don't know, something with the rabbits, maybe, or the locals, those poor gauchos who accept me and put up with me and never complain? The shadows of the city declined to provide an answer. Keeping quiet, as usual, Pereda thought reproachfully. But when the dawn began to dawn, he decided to go back.

POLICE RAT

for Robert Amutio and Chris Andrew

My name is José, though people call me Pepe, and some, usually those who don't know me well, or with whom I'm not on familiar terms, call me Pepe the Cop. Pepe is a benign, well-meaning, genial diminutive, neither scornful nor flattering, and yet the appellation does imply, if I can put it this way, a certain affection, something more than detached respect. Then there's the other name, the alias, the tail or the hump that I lug around cheerfully, without taking offense, partly because it's never or almost never used in my presence. Pepe the Cop: it's like tossing affection and fear, desire and abuse into the same dark bag. Where does the word *cop* come from? It comes from *copper*, he who cops or caps, that is captures, takes hold of, nabs, in other words, he who has the authority to arrest and hold, who doesn't have to answer to anyone, who has *impunity*. And they call me Pepe the Cop because that's exactly what I am; it's a job like any other, but few people are prepared to take it on. If I'd known what I know now when I joined the force, I wouldn't have been prepared to take it on either. What made me join the police force? That's a question I've often asked myself, especially lately, and I can't come up with a convincing answer.

I was probably dimmer than most in my youth. Maybe I was disappointed in love (though I can't actually recall being in love at the time), or maybe it was fate; maybe I realized I was different, and looked for a solitary job, a job that would allow me to spend hour after hour in the most absolute solitude, but would, at the same time, be of some practical use, so it wouldn't be a burden on anyone.

In any case, there was a vacancy for a police officer and I applied and the bosses took a look at me, and in less than half a minute the job was mine. One of them at least, and maybe the others as well, already knew that I was one of Josephine the Singer's nephews, although they were careful not to go spreading it around. My brothers and cousins—the other nephews—were normal in every way, and happy. I was happy too in my way, but it was obvious that I was related to Josephine, that I belonged to her line. Maybe that influenced the bosses' decision to give me the job. Or not—maybe I was just the first to apply. Maybe they thought no one else would, and if they made me wait, I'd change my mind. I really can't say. All I know for sure is that I joined the force and from the very first day I spent my time wandering through the sewers, sometimes the main ones, where the water flows, sometimes the branch sewers, where we are constantly digging tunnels to gain access to new food sources or provide escape routes or link up with labyrinths that seem, at first glance, to serve no purpose, and yet all those byways go to make up the network in which our people circulate and survive.

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