

Also by Guillermo Arriaga

Un dulce olor a muerte/The Sweet Smell of Death

Escuadrón guillotina



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“The flashes of his eyes suddenly revealed to me that we men do not belong to one single species, but to many, and that from one species to another, within mankind, there are impassable distances, worlds irreducible to a common term, capable of producing—if from one world, one were to look into the depths of one facing him—the vertigo of the other.”

—Martín Luis Guzmán

I decided to visit Gregorio on a Saturday afternoon, three weeks after his most recent release from the hospital. It wasn't easy for me to seek him out. I thought it over for months. I was afraid of meeting him again, almost as if I were anticipating an ambush. That afternoon I walked around the block several times not daring to knock on his door. When I finally did, I was nervous, restless, and—why not say it—feeling a little cowardly.

His mother opened the door. She greeted me affectionately and then led me straight into the living room, as if she'd been awaiting my return. She called her son. Gregorio emerged on the stairs. He slowly descended the steps. He stopped and leaned on the banister. He studied my face for a few seconds, smiled, and walked toward me to give me a hug. His vehemence intimidated me and I didn't know how to respond to his gesture. I didn't know if he had really forgiven me or if we'd forgiven each other.

His mother said something meaningless and excused herself to leave us alone. We went up to Gregorio's room like we used to. We walked in and he shut the lockless door. He lay on the bed. He looked relaxed, at ease. There was nothing in his face to make me suspect he was faking it. It looked as if he'd finally regained some peace.

I sat in the usual place—the director's chair Gregorio had at his desk—and started the conversation in the stupidest and most obvious way possible:

“How do you feel?” I asked him.

Gregorio straightened up and arched his eyebrows.

“How do I look?”

“Fine.”

Gregorio shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, then I'm fine.”

WE SPOKE FOR HOURS, small talk. We needed to get a sense of the territory again. Especially me: I didn't want to walk back to the edge of the abyss. Out of luck, respect, or maybe just mere courtesy, he didn't ask me about Tania, even though I'm sure we both thought of her in each of our silences.

We said good-bye well into the night. We gave each other a prolonged hug. We said we'd see each other soon, for lunch or a movie. I left the house. A cold wind was trailing a vague rumor of voices and the rumble of cars along with it. It smelled of burned garbage. A streetlight flickered, intermittently lighting the sidewalk. I closed my eyes. I couldn't walk away from Gregorio. His friendship was indispensable. Even when he threatened me and hurt me, I couldn't leave him.

FOUR DAYS LATER the phone rang. I answered: mute breathing. I thought it might be a joke or one of the stupid girls who wanted to talk to my brother and were too shy to ask for him.

I was about to hang up when I heard Margarita's weak voice.

"Hello...Manuel?" she mumbled.

"Yeah."

"Manuel..." again, and was silent.

"What happened?"

"My brother..." she whispered. I heard her tense breathing again.

"Margarita, what happened?"

She said nothing else and hung up.

MARGARITA TRIED, but was unable to tell me the news that subsequent phone calls would confirm: Gregorio had shot himself in the head. They'd found him agonizing in a puddle of blood, with his left hand still gripping the revolver.

The boarded windows and iron bars, the lockless door, the patience, love, sedatives, shock therapy, all those months spent in mental hospitals, the pain. The pain. All useless.

Gregorio died on his mother's lap, stretched out on the backseat of the car his father feverishly drove to the hospital. He killed himself with the same gun we'd stolen years ago from a cop guarding the entrance to a convenience store. It was a rusty .38 Brazilian revolver; we'd doubted whether it worked at all until we decided to test it on a stray dog. On the first shot the mutt collapsed with its muzzle blasted to pieces. From then on until the day he died, Gregorio learned how to hide the gun in several places, avoiding the detailed searches carried out wherever he lived.

Gregorio wrapped the gun in a plastic bag—loaded with six hollow-point bullets—and buried it in a flowerpot with budding red geraniums. When we pieced the suicide together we deduced that he took the revolver out of its hiding place while pretending to tend to the plants in the garden—an activity his doctors recommended for a speedier recovery. Gregorio took the gun, hid it under his shirt, and left his work in a hurry, leaving a trowel, a spade, and a bag of fertilizer behind.

Resolute, he went up to his room. He pushed the desk against the door and entered the bathroom. He cocked the revolver, looked at himself in the mirror, held the muzzle to his left eyebrow, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet crossed diagonally through his brain, bursting through arteries, neurons, desires, tenderness, hatred, bones. Gregorio collapsed on the tiles with two holes in his skull. He was about to turn twenty-three.

JOAQUÍN, HIS YOUNGER BROTHER, took care of everything related to the burial as well as the police department's interrogations and requirements. His mother, exhausted, fell asleep on the living room sofa without even changing her bloodstained blouse. His father holed up in his son's room in search of clues to help him understand what happened. Margarita, who first focused on informing family and friends, surrendered to her impotence and fled to the house of one of her cousins, where she sank into a rocking chair, drank Diet Coke, and stared at the TV.

I went with Joaquín to the funeral home. We both chose the coffin: the cheapest and simplest one. It was all the family savings could afford, drained by Gregorio's countless medical and psychiatric expenses.

The body arrived at the funeral home at three in the morning. Luckily, a distant uncle—a somewhat prestigious lawyer—dealt with the paperwork to avoid an autopsy and to expedite the body's release from the morgue.

An employee from the funeral home asked us to go identify the body. I offered to do it: Joaquín had gone through enough.

The man led me down some stairs to a basement. Halfway there I stopped, regretting my offer. How could I face Gregorio again? Especially, how could I face him in death? Dizzy, I brought my hand to my head. I had trouble breathing. Wasn't a brief description enough? The man took me by the arm and ushered me on. In an effort to console me, he said a quick glance would be enough to finish the procedure.

We walked into a windowless room lit by tubes of fluorescent light. Gregorio, or what once was Gregorio, lay on a metal table, a white sheet drawn up to his chest. Death had given his face a light, slender expression. There were no remnants of his cold, challenging demeanor. A bandage on his left brow covered the suicidal orifice. A purplish hematoma colored his forehead. His hair, smeared with blood, looked as if it'd been slicked back with gel. His unshaven beard gave him an air of exhaustion and a kind of tedium. I stared at him for a few minutes; he looked less intimidating dead than he had alive—much less.

"It's him, right?" the man asked hesitantly upon seeing me engrossed.

I looked at Gregorio's body one last time. How to say good-bye? Say it, just like that, or squeeze his hand and cry beside him? How to explain to him that his death hurt and infuriated and humiliated me? How to say all this to a quiet, a stupidly quiet, corpse?

"Yes, that's Gregorio Valdés," I said, and turned to leave.

THE WAKE WAS sparsely attended. Even once the news spread, few dared to give their condolences: The body of a suicide is always upsetting.

Gregorio's family wandered aimlessly through the chapel. His mother napped with her grief in isolated corners. His father digressed in the middle of his sentences, leaving them unfinished and surging in exasperating silences. Margarita babbled nonsense and Joaquín, swollen with fatigue, clumsily tried to stay awake.

The parents endured everything: gossip, furtive glances, fake mourning. Though atheists, they allowed a priest (for whose services the funeral home opportunely charged under the pretext of a donation) to conduct mass. They even allowed in a cheap tabloid reporter who spent his time shamelessly snooping around.

AT FIVE O'CLOCK in the afternoon, the funeral cortege set out. Only four cars followed the hearse to the graveyard. Thanks to a dispensation obtained by the lawyer uncle, Gregorio was cremated. I shuddered while watching the blue smoke surging from the crematory's chimney. Even in the small amphitheater I'd still felt Gregorio close to me: palpable, human. Now the smoke spirals signaled his definitive death.

I didn't wait for them to deliver the urn. Crying, I snuck out a side door to the cemetery. Since I didn't have any money for a taxi or a bus, I decided to go home on foot. I walked down the streets without noticing the countless stalls of street vendors, the tumult outside the metro station, the traffic, the car exhaust—sometimes also blue.

I arrived home. My parents were waiting for me, worried about my being late. They'd only quickly stopped by the funeral home. They couldn't even take five minutes of the hopeless atmosphere.

We ate dinner in silence. When we finished my mother took my hand and kissed my forehead. I noticed her eyes were swollen.

I went up to my room. I grabbed the phone and called Tania. Her sister told me she was already asleep. Moody, she asked me if I wanted her to wake Tania up. I said no, that I'd call her later.

Tania neither wanted to go to the wake nor the cremation. For her, Gregorio wasn't dead just yet. She'd told me in the morning.

"He's still plotting something," she assured me. "Gregorio won't leave just like that."

She sounded anxious, agitated. I scolded her for being so childishly afraid of him.

"Don't forget he was the King Midas of destruction," she pronounced.

"Was," I pointed out.

"He always will be."

She said it wasn't a coincidence that Gregorio had committed suicide a few days after seeing me or that he'd specifically chosen the twenty-second of February to blow his brains out.

"It's his way of getting his own, can't you see? The son of a bitch is smearing his blood on us."

I wasn't able to calm her down, much less convince her to come with me to the wake or burial. Her attitude seemed petty and unfair; the dead don't deserve to be left alone.

I TRIED TO READ for a while but couldn't concentrate. I turned off the light and lay down. Exhausted, I soon fell asleep. At midnight, I woke up with the feeling that an earwig had sprung from Gregorio's lifeless mouth and jumped on me to bury itself in one of my forearms. I leapt out of bed and rubbed my body desperately till I finally calmed down. I dreamt of an earwig again. I'd dreamt of earwigs dozens of times.

Sweating, I walked toward the window and opened it. The wind brought the night's breath: wailing sirens, barking, music in the distance. The cold air refreshed me. I went back to my bed and sat on the edge of the mattress. I remembered the body on the metal table. Gregorio had always wanted to murder someone, to touch the limits of death. Now he'd done it.

I turned on the bedside lamp. From the nightstand, I grabbed the frame with Tania's photograph in it. Dressed in a high school uniform, Tania looked at the camera smiling, her hair falling over her shoulders in layers. "I love you Manuel" was written in one of the corners of the portrait. Underneath was her signature and a blurred date: February twenty-second. Why did loving her have to hurt so much?

I put the picture back in its place and turned on the TV with the hope that some insipid nighttime programming would lull me to sleep.

I GOT UP AT DAWN, ragged from insomnia. I went down to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of milk. No one else was awake yet. I started reading the previous day's newspaper and found nothing interesting. I left the paper on the table and half-heartedly drank the milk. Six in the morning and I couldn't find anything to do.

I decided to take a shower. As I undressed, I looked at the tiles. They were of a similar color and texture to the ones in Gregorio's bathroom. I saw him falling backward with his skull burst open. I could clearly hear the snap of his body bouncing off the towel rack, the bubbling of his blood, his hoarse panting. I turned on the shower and stuck my head under the freezing stream until the nape of my neck hurt. I abruptly pulled my head out. Hundreds of cold drops slid down my back. I sat on the floor and shivered. I grabbed a towel and wrapped myself in it, but I couldn't stop shaking for a long while.

I left the bathroom and lay down on the bed naked, with my hair still soaking wet. I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

I WOKE UP FOUR HOURS LATER, numb: I'd forgotten to close the window and the wind was circulating through the room. Without entirely waking up, I sat up to close it. I could hear the bustle of children playing in a nearby school and a song from a woman pinning up clothes on a neighboring rooftop. I spotted a note on the floor that my mother had slid under the door. Tania and Margarita had called.

I tried reaching Tania first, but no one answered at her house. I remembered it was Thursday and thought she and her sister were probably at school. I looked at the clock: twelve-thirty. In fifteen minutes, Tania would walk out of her Textile Design class and go have a cup of coffee and play dominoes with her friends. It pissed me off that Tania would go on with her daily life, as if the bullet that tore through that Tuesday afternoon weren't reason enough to stop it dead.

Then I dialed Gregorio's house (was it still his house? A dead man's house?). Margarita answered. She explained that her parents weren't there but that her mother had asked her to invite me to dinner.

"What for?" I asked.

"Well, to chat, I think," she answered, disconcerted.

I refused without even considering the possibility.

"I can't tonight."

She insisted, but I still declined. She remained silent for a few seconds.

"Can you come right now?" she inquired nervously.

"What for?"

Margarita sighed deeply.

"I need to see you," she said under her breath.

Her request seemed out of place. Margarita and I had had a fleeting, secret, purely sexual relationship, of which we soon got tired. We decided never to discuss it again and swore never to tell anyone.

"You don't need to see me," I said aggressively.

"It's not for what you're thinking," she snapped back angrily, "it's for something completely different."

“Oh yeah?”

“You’re an asshole.”

Margarita grew silent.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She kept quiet for a few more seconds, clicked her tongue, and started muttering.

“About a month ago...or three weeks...I can’t remember, Gregorio asked me to keep a box for him...a small box...of chocolates...”

She stopped, gulped, and continued.

“He asked me to keep it safe and now...”

Her voice cracked, but she didn’t cry.

“I can’t find it, Manuel,” she went on. “I can’t find the fucking box.”

“Where did you leave it? Think.”

No, she couldn’t remember. She couldn’t even remember that she was the first one to walk into the bathroom after the shot, that she found her older brother gushing blood next to the sink, that she tried to stop the bleeding by stuffing the wounds with pieces of toilet paper, that she carried the limp body all the way to the car, and that she was left standing in the middle of the street without knowing what to do. No, Margarita couldn’t remember anything.

“Help me look for it,” she implored, “please.”

I agreed to meet her at her house at seven o’clock that night, before her parents returned. I promised her that together we’d find the box, that she shouldn’t worry. She sighed a good-bye and hung up. I wanted to kiss her again, to stroke her and make love to her.

I GOT UP OUT OF BED. My head and neck ached. I walked toward the closet. For a long time, I stared at my clothes, indecisive about what to wear. I decided to put on some jeans, sneakers, and a black T-shirt. It had been awhile since I'd worn T-shirts. I hadn't worn Polo shirts or short-sleeve shirts either. I wanted to avoid people noticing the scars on my left biceps. They were unpleasant, reddish marks left over from when I rubbed my arm with a pumice stone. I'd tried to erase a tattoo I'd gotten with Gregorio on an April night in a neighborhood near El Chopo.

He insisted that we have the silhouette of an American buffalo tattooed on our left arms. Gregorio even asked for us to be tattooed with the same needles, so that the ink would mark us mixed with our blood.

At first I didn't mind, but after a few months the buffalo became an increasingly intolerable symbol. To look at my left biceps eventually infuriated me: I'd fallen into another trap set by Gregorio in his obsession.

The tattoo meant a pact of blind loyalty between us. But how could I talk of loyalty when, back then, I was sleeping with Tania on a daily basis? What loyalty could I profess to a guy who spent most of the year locked away in mental hospitals? What fucking loyalty?

Gregorio, however, demanded that loyalty, minute by minute, even when he knew it was false. And he demanded it through cheating, blackmail, threats.

Gregorio slowly, stealthily fenced me in. Bit by bit he started to control every one of my daily movements. His presence, even at a distance, surrounded, subdued me. Too late, I realized that the reason for the tattoo was to consolidate his siege, to stalk me in and from my body.

That's why, after rubbing myself raw with the pumice stone, I scraped the live flesh with a kitchen knife. I tried to remove even the last hint of ink from my tissues, without caring if I was crisscrossing my biceps with deep and desperate slices.

That afternoon, my arm ended up swollen and bleeding. I had to go to a clinic, where a doctor sewed up three of the wounds. One of them needed eight stitches.

I had antitetanus shots and high doses of penicillin injected into me. It took some time to heal and when the scabs fell off it looked like a claw mark with glossy edges. Even though I tore up my arm, I was unsuccessful: The diffuse lines of the blue buffalo are still visible.

From then on I tried to hide my scars. Not out of vanity, but because people have an annoying habit of asking about the origins of scars and I was no longer in the mood to explain mine.

That Thursday I put on the black T-shirt, not to challenge curious glances, but to remember that

the past, no matter how much one may pretend, is impossible to tear out, that it remains like an old burn mark that flares up again and again, and that it's better to live with it than against it. —

I WENT DOWN to the kitchen and saw Marta, the woman who helped do the ironing. She told me that my mother had gone to the market in my brother's car and that she'd left hers in case I needed anything.

I left hoping to find Tania at the university. I hadn't seen her in three days. Halfway there I realized that I'd left without anything warm to wear, and nothing to hide my scars.

I arrived at two in the afternoon. There were few people at the university at that time. I went looking for Tania's classroom: B-112. I looked through the window in the door and didn't see her. I signaled one of her friends to come out of the classroom. When I asked her about Tania she said that she hadn't shown up since the previous day.

I called Tania's house from a pay phone, but no one answered. Disconcerted, I wandered down the university's empty hallways. I thought of where I might find her. When she was depressed or wanted to be alone, she liked to go to the zoo to watch the jaguars. She also used to go to the airport. She'd sit at one of the café tables, next to the large windows angled toward the runways, and watch the planes endlessly taking off and landing. She never told me why she went to these places when she needed to find peace.

I FELT I'D FIND TANIA at the zoo and headed over there via Paseo de la Reforma. The three o'clock traffic moved slowly. A slight accident between a taxi driver and a woman driving a minivan packed with little girls had aggravated the gridlock. They had blocked two lanes. The woman's hands flailed almost touching the taxi driver's face, while he just watched her with a smirk. From inside the van, the girls, dressed in brown Catholic school uniforms, stared at the scene, frightened. What did Tania react in the jaguar's spots?

It took me fifty minutes to get there. To top it off, I parked the car twenty blocks away. I walked toward the zoo down a path that ran through Chapultepec park. The wind blew, carrying dry leaves and trash. I regretted not having brought a sweater or jacket.

When I arrived at the entrance to the zoo, groups of secondary school students were filing out. One of them walked with his hands in his pockets, staring at the ground, detached from his classmates' shoving and joking. He reminded me of Gregorio at that age.

I went straight to the jaguar pit but didn't find Tania.

I stayed awhile to watch them. The enormous male slept under a tree, while the female, smaller, took shelter from the wind between the rocks. For several minutes they didn't move, then the male got up, raised his head and stretched, and lazily sauntered toward the female. He sniffed her, growled tamely at her, and flopped down beside her. That was it.

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