EL COSTO DE LA VIDA

Salvador Rentería se levantó muy temprano. Cruzó corriendo la azotea. No calentó el bóiler. Se quitó los calzoncillos y el chubasco frío le sentó bien. Se fregó con la toalla y regresó al cuarto. Ana le preguntó desde la cama si no iba a desayunar. Salvador dijo que se tomaría un café por ahí. La mujer llevaba dos semanas en cama y su cara color de piloncillo se había adelgazado. Le preguntó a Salvador si no había recado de la oficina y él se metió un cigarrillo entre los labios y le contestó que querían que ella misma fuera a firmar. Ana suspiró y dijo:

— ¿Cómo quieren?
— Ya les dije que ahora no podías, pero ya ves cómo son.

— ¿Qué te dijo el doctor?
Arrójó el cigarrillo sin fumar por el vidrio roto de la ventana y se pasó los dedos por el bigote y las sienes. Ana sonrió y se recargó contra la cabecera de latón. Salvador se sentó a su lado y le tomó la mano y le dijo que no se preocupara, que pronto volvería a trabajar. Los dos se quedaron callados y miraron el ropero de madera, el cajón con trastos y provisiones, la hornilla eléctrica, el aguamanil y los montones de periódicos viejos. Salvador le besó la mano a su mujer y salió del cuarto a la azotea. Bajó por la escalera de servicio y luego atravesó los patios del primer piso y olió las mezclas de cocina que llegaban de los otros cuartos de la vecindad. Pasó entre los patines y los perros y salió a la calle. Entró a la tienda, que era el antiguo garaje de la casa, y el comerciante viejo le dijo que no había llegado el Life en español y siguió paseándose de un estante a otro, abriendo los candados. Señaló un puesto lleno de historietas dibujadas y dijo:

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Salvador Rentería got up very early. He ran across the landing. He didn’t light the boiler. He took off his pants and the cold shower made him feel good. He rubbed himself down with the towel and went back to the bedroom. Ana asked him from the bed whether he wasn’t going to have breakfast. Salvador said that he’d have a coffee out. His wife had been in bed for two weeks now, and her face, the pasty colour of a sugar loaf, had got thinner. She asked Salvador whether there hadn’t been a message from the office and he put a cigarette between his lips and told her that they wanted her to go and sign herself. Ana sighed and said:

‘How do they expect me to do that?’
‘I’ve already told them that you can’t just now, but you know what they’re like.’
‘What did the doctor tell you?’
He threw his unsmoked cigarette through the broken window-pane and smoothed his moustache and forehead with his fingers. Ana smiled and settled back against the metal bedhead. Salvador sat down by her and took her hand and told her not to worry, she’d soon be going back to work. They both went quiet, gazing at the wooden wardrobe, the box full of hardware and provisions, the electric cooker, the wash-basin and the piles of old newspapers. Salvador kissed his wife’s hand and went out of the room onto the landing. He went down the service stairs and then crossed the courtyard at ground-floor level, smelling the mixture of kitchen smells that reached him from the other rooms in the block. He went past the roller-skaters and the dogs and out into the street. He went into the shop, which used to be the garage of the house, and the old shop-keeper told him that the Spanish edition of Life had not come in and went on going from one showcase to another undoing the padlocks. He pointed to a stand covered in strip-cartoon novels and said:

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– Puede que haiga1 otra revista para tu señora. La gente
se aburre metida en la cama.

Salvador salió. Pasó por la calle una banda de chiquillos
disparando pistolas de fulminates y detrás de ellos un
hombre arreaba unas cabras desde el potro. Salvador le
pidió un litro de leche y le dijo que lo subiera al 12. Clavó
las manos en los bolsillos y caminó, casi trotando, de
espaldas,2 para no perder el camión.3 Subió al camión en
marcha y buscó en la bolsa de la chamarr4 treinta centavos
y se sentó a ver pasar los cipreses, las casas, las rejas y las
calles polvorientas de San Francisco Xocotitla. El camión
corrió al lado de la vía del tren, sobre el puente de Nono-
allo. Se levantaba el humo de los rieles. Desde la banca
de madera, miró los transportes cargados de abastecimientos
que entraban a la ciudad. En Manuel González, un in-
spector subió a rasgar los boletos y Salvador se bajó en
la siguiente esquina.

Caminó hasta la casa de su padre por el rumbo de Vallejo.
Cruzó el jardincillo de pasto seco y abrió la puerta. Clemencia
lo saludó y Salvador preguntó si el viejo ya andaba de pie y
Pedro Rentería se asomó detrás de la cortina que separaba
la recámara de la salita y le dijo: – ¿Qué madrugador! Es-
pérame. Ya mero estoy.5

Salvador manoseó los respaldos de las sillas. Clemencia
pasaba el sacudidor sobre la mesa de ocote6 sin pulir y
luego sacó de la vitrina un mantel y platos de barro. Preguntó
cómo seguía Anita y se arregló el busto bajo la bata floreada.

– Mejorcita.
– Ha de necesitar quien la ayude. Si no se pusiera tantos
moños ...7

Los dos se miraron y luego Salvador observó las paredes
manchadas por el agua que se había colado desde la azotea.
Apartó la cortina y entró a la recámara revuelta. Su padre
se estaba quitando el jabón de la cara. Salvador le pasó un
brazo por los hombros y le besó la frente. Pedro le pellizcó

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‘Perhaps there might be some other magazine for your wife.
People get bored stuck in bed.’

Salvador went out. In the street he passed a gang of small
boys firing off cap pistols, and behind them a man was driving
some goats in from the pen. Salvador asked him for a litre of
milk and told him to take it up to Number 12. He stuck his
hands in his pockets and set off, almost at a run, going back-
wards so as not to miss the bus. He leapt onto the bus as it was
moving off and got thirty cents out of his coat pocket and sat
down to watch the cypress trees, the houses, the grilles and the
dusty streets of San Francisco Xocotitla going by. The bus
went along by the railway, over the Nonocalco bridge. Steam
rose from the rails. From his wooden seat he watched the
trucks laden with supplies going into the city. At Manuel
Gonzalez street an inspector got on to tear the tickets and
Salvador got off at the next corner.

He went to his father’s house, which was over towards
Vallejo. He went through the little garden of scorched lawn
and opened the door. Clemencia greeted him, and as Salvador
asked if the old man was up yet Pedro Rentería emerged from
behind the curtain that separated the bedroom from the small
living room and said: ‘What an early bird! Wait for me. I’m just
coming!’

Salvador ran his hands over the backs of the chairs. Clemen-
cia dusted the unvarnished pine table and then took a table-
cloth and earthenware dishes from the glass-fronted cupboard.
She asked how Anita was getting on and smoothed her bosom
under her flowered house-coat.

‘A little better.’

‘She must need someone to help her. If she didn’t give her-
sell such airs ...’

They looked at each other, and then Salvador noticed how
the walls were stained with the water that had seeped through
from the flat roof. He pulled the curtain aside and went into
the untidy bedroom. His father was washing the soap off his
face. Salvador put an arm round his shoulders and kissed him
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el estómago. Los dos se vieron en el espejo. Se parecían, pero el padre era más calvo y tenía el pelo más rizado y le preguntó qué andaba haciendo a estas horas y Salvador dijo que después no podía venir, que Ana estaba muy mala y no iba a poder trabajar en todo el mes y que necesitaban lana. Pedro se encogió de hombros y Salvador le dijo que no iba a pedirle prestado.

- Lo que se me ocurra es que podías hablar con tu patrón; algo me podrá ofrecer. Alguna chamba.
- Pues eso sí quién sabe. Ayúdame con los tirantes.
- Es que de plano no me va a alcanzar.
- No te apures. Algo te caerá. A ver qué se me ocurre.

Pedro se fijó los pantalones y tomó la gorra de chofer de la mesa de noche. Abrázó a Salvador y lo llevó a la mesa. Olfateó los huevos rancheros que Clemencia les colocó en el centro.

- Sirvete, Chava. ¿Qué más quisiera uno que ayudarte. Pero ya ves, bastante apretados vivimos Clemencia y yo, y eso que me ahorro la comida y la merienda en casa del patrón. Si no fuera por eso... Bruja naci y bruja he de morirme. Ahora, date cuenta que si empiezo a pedir favores personales, con lo duro que es Don José, luego me los cobra y adiós aumento. Créeme, Chava, necesito sacarle esos doscientos cincuenta.

Hizo un buche de salsa y tortilla y bajó la voz:

- Ya sé que respetas mucho la memoria de tu mamacita, y yo, pues ni se diga, pero esto de mantener dos casas cuando pudiéramos vivir todos juntos y ahorrañas una renta... Está bueno, no dije nada. Pero ahora díme, ¿sientones por qué no viven con tus suegros?
- Ya ves cómo es doña Concha. Todo el día jeringa que si Ana nació para esto o para lo otro. Ya sabes que por eso nos salimos de su casa.

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on the forehead. Pedro pinched his stomach. They could both see themselves in the mirror. They were alike, but the father was balder and his hair was curlier. He asked him what he was doing about at that time of day, and Salvador said that he couldn’t come any later, that Ana was very ill and was not going to be able to work all that month and they needed some cash. Pedro shrugged and Salvador said that he wasn’t going to ask for a loan.

‘What struck me was that you could talk to your boss; he might be able to offer me something. Some job.’

‘Well yes... who knows... Help me with these braces.’

‘It’s that I simply won’t be able to make ends meet.’

‘Don’t worry. Something will come your way. Let’s see what I can think of.’

Pedro did up his belt and took his driver’s cap off the bedside table. He put his arm round Salvador and led him to the table. He sniffed at the country-style eggs that Clemencia had put on the table for them.

‘Help yourself, lad. What would one rather do than give you a hand. But you can see for yourself, we’re pretty hard up, Clemencia and me, and that’s with me getting my lunches and dinners free at the boss’s. If it weren’t for that... I was born poor and poor I’ll die. Now then, just you think, if I start asking personal favours, with Don José tough the way he is, he’ll be soon charging me for them and I can say good-bye to any rises. Believe me, lad, I need to get those 250 out of him.’

He prepared a mouthful of sauce and omelette and lowered his voice:

‘I know how much you respect the memory of your dear mum, and as for me, it goes without saying, but this business of keeping up two households when we could all live together and save one rent... All right, I didn’t say a thing. But tell me now, why don’t you live with your in-laws, then?’

‘You know what Doña Concha’s like. All day long going on about how Ana was born to be this or that. You know that’s why we left her place.’
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- Pues sí quieres tu independencia, a fletarse. No te preocupes. Ya se me ocurrirá algo.
  Clemencia se limpió los ojos con el delantal y tomó asiento entre el padre y el hijo.
  - ¿Dónde están los niños? - preguntó.
  - Con los papás de Ana - contestó Salvador -. Van a pasar una temporada allí mientras ella se cura.
  Pedro dijo que iba a llevar al patrón a Acapulco. - Si necesitas algo, busca a Clemencia. Ya sé. Vete a ver a mi amigo Juan Olmedo. Es cuate viejo y tiene una flotilla de ruleteo. Yo le hablo por teléfono para decirle que vas.

Besó la mano de su padre y salió.

* *

Abrió la puerta de vidrio opaco y entró a un recibidor donde estaban una secretaria y un ayudante contable y había muebles de acero, una máquina de escribir y una sumadora. Dijo quién era y la secretaria entró al privado del señor Olmedo y después lo hizo pasar. Era un hombre flaco y muy pequeño y los dos se sentaron en los sillones de cuero frente a una mesa baja con fotos de banquetes y ceremonias y un vidrio encima. Salvador le dijo que necesitaba trabajo para complementar el sueldo de maestro y Olmedo se puso a hurgar entre unos grandes cuadernos negros.

- Estás de suerte - dijo al rascarse la oreja puntiaguda y llena de pelo -. Aquí hay un horario muy bueno de siete a doce de la noche. Andan muchos detrás de esta chamba, porque yo protejo a mis trabajadores. - Cerró de un golpe el libro. - Pero como tú eres hijo de mi viejo cuate Pedrito, pues te la voy a dar a ti. Vas a empezar hoy mismo. Si trabajas duro, puedes sacar hasta veinte pesos diarios.
  Durante algunos segundos, sólo escuchó el tictac de la máquina sumadora y el zumbido de los motores por la avenida del 20 de Noviembre. Olmedo dijo que tenía que salir y lo invitó a que lo acompañara. Bajaron sin hablar en

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‘Well, if you want your independence, you’ll have to get moving. Don’t worry. I’ll think of something.’
  Clemencia wiped her eyes with her apron and sat down between the father and the son.
  ‘Where are the children?’ she asked.
  ‘With Ana’s parents,’ answered Salvador. ‘They’re staying there for a bit while she gets better.’
  Pedro said that he was taking his boss to Acapulco. ‘If there’s anything you need, contact Clemencia. I’ve got it. Go and see my friend Juan Olmedo. He’s an old mate of mine, and he’s got a fleet of taxis. I’ll speak to him on the phone and tell him you’re going.’
  He kissed his father’s hand and left.

* *

He opened the frosted-glass door and went into a vestibule where there was a secretary and an accounts clerk and steel furniture, a typewriter and an adding machine. He said who he was and the secretary went into Señor Olmedo’s private office and then showed him in. Olmedo was a thin man and very small and they both sat down in leather armchairs at a low table with photographs of banquets and ceremonies covered by a sheet of glass. Salvador told him he needed work to supplement his school-teacher’s pay and Olmedo started to leaf through some large black notebooks.

‘You’re in luck,’ he said, scratching his ear, which was pointed and full of hairs. ‘Here we have a good shift from seven o’clock to midnight. There’s lots of people after this job, because I take care of my staff.’ He banged the great book shut.
‘But since you are the son of my old mate Pedrito, I’m going to give it to you. You’ll start this very day. If you work hard, you can take home up to twenty pesos a day.’
  For a few moments, all he could hear was the tic-tac of the adding machine and the hum of cars on the Avenue of the Twentieth of November. Olmedo said he had to go out and invited him to join him. They took the lift down without
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el elevador y al llegar a la calle Olmedo le advirtió que debía
dar banderazo cada vez que el cliente se detenía a hacer un
encarguito, porque había cada tarugo que por un solo
banderazo paseaba al cliente una hora por todo México. Lo
rompió del codo y entraron al Departamento del Distrito
Federal y subieron por las escaleras y Olmedo siguió
diciendo que le prohibía subir a toda la gente que iba por el
camino.
—Dejadita por aquí, dejadita por allá y al rato ya cruzaste
de la Villa al Pedregal por un solo banderazo de uno cin-
cuenta. ¡Sí serán de a tiro...!14

Olmedo le ofreció gomitas azucaradas a una secretaria y
pidió que lo introdujera al despacho del jefe. La señorita
agradeció los dulces y entró al privado del funcionario y
Olmedo hizo chistes con los demás empleados y los invitó
tomarse unas cervezas el sábado y jugar dominó después.
Salvador le dio la mano y las gracias y Olmedo le dijo:

—¿Traes la licencia en regla? No quiero líos con Tránsito.
Preséntate hoy en la noche, antes de las siete. Busca allá
abajo a Toribio, el encargado de dar las salidas. Él te dirá
cuál es tu coche. Nada de dejaditas de a peso, ya sabes; se
amuelan las portezuelas. Y nada de un solo banderazo por
varias dejadas. Apenas se baje el cliente del coche, aunque
sea para escupir en la calle, tú vuelves a marcar. Salúdame
al viejo.

*

Miró el reloj de Catedral. Eran las once. Caminó un rato
por la Merced y se divirtió viendo las cajas llenas de
jitomates,15 naranjas y calabazas. Se sentó a fumar un rato
en la plaza, junto a los cargadores que bebían cervezas y
hojearan los diarios deportivos. Se aburrió y caminó hasta
San Juan de Letrán. Delante de él caminaba una muchacha.
Se le cayó un paquete de los brazos y Salvador se apresuró
a recogerlo y ella le sonrió y le dio las gracias. El joven le
apretó el brazo y le dijo:

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speaking and as they got into the street Olmedo warned him
that he must restart the clock each time a client stopped on
some errand or other, because there was always some idiot
who'd run a client round the whole of Mexico City for an
hour all on the same fare. He took him by the elbow and
they went into the Federal District Department and up the stair-
case and Olmedo went on telling him that it was forbidden
to pick up lots of people going in the same direction.
‘You drop off one here, one there, and soon you’ll have gone
right across from La Villa to the Pedregal for a single 1.50 starter.
Some people have all the cheek...!’

Olmedo offered one of the secretaries some fruit gums
and asked her to take him into the boss’s office. The young
girl thanked him for the sweets and went into the official’s
private office while Olmedo joked with the other people work-
ing there and invited them along for a couple of beers
the following Saturday and a game of dominoes afterwards.
Salvador shook his hand and thanked him and Olmedo said:
‘Is your licence in order? I don’t want any trouble with the
traffic people. Come along this evening, before seven. Look
for Toribio down there, he’s in charge of out-going cars. He’ll
tell you which is your car. No one-peso trips, remember; it
ruins the doors. And none of this business of one fare for lots
of stops. As soon as the client gets out of the car, even if it’s
just to spit in the street, clock it up again. My regards to the
old man.’

*

He glanced at the Cathedral clock. It was eleven o’clock. He
wandered a while down Merced Street, enjoying the sight of
the boxes full of tomatoes, oranges and pumpkins. He sat down
to smoke for a bit in the square, close to the porters who were
drinking beers and flicking through the sports papers. He got
bored and walked on up to San Juan de Letrán Street. A girl
was walking along ahead of him. A parcel fell from her arms
and Salvador rushed forward to pick it up and she smiled at him
and thanked him. The young man pressed her arm and said:
'Shall we go and have a lemonade?'
'Excuse me, señor, I don't usually ...'
'Forgive me. I didn't want to be familiar ...'

The girl went on, with short, rapid steps. She was wiggling her hips, wearing a white skirt. She glanced sideways at the shop-windows. Salvador followed her at a distance. Then she stopped by an ice-cream cart and asked for a strawberry lolly. Salvador darted forward to pay, and she smiled and thanked him. They went into a snack bar, sat down in one of the recesses and ordered two Sidrals. She asked him what he did for a living and he asked her to guess and moved his fists about like a boxer and she said he was a boxer and he laughed and said that when he was a kid he'd trained a lot in the 'Plan Sexenal' but he was really a school-teacher. She told him she worked in a cinema box office. She moved her arm, upsetting the Sidral bottle and they both laughed a lot.

They got on a bus together. They didn't speak. He took her hand and they got off at Chapultepec Park. Cars were cruising slowly along the avenues in the park. There were lots of convertibles full of young people. Many women went past with children, dragging, carrying or pushing them along. The children were sucking lollies or candyfloss. You could hear the whistles of the balloon-sellers and a band playing on the bandstand. The girl told him she liked guessing what the people strolling in Chapultepec did for a living. She laughed and went along pointing: black jacket or open-necked shirt, leather shoes or sandals, a cotton skirt or a sequined blouse, striped vest, patent-leather high heels: she said they were a carpenter, an electrician, an office-girl, a tax man, a school-teacher, a housemaid, a pedlar. They reached the lake and took a boat. Salvador took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. The girl trailed her fingers in the water and shut her eyes. Salvador whistled snatches of several tunes as he rowed. He paused and touched the girl's knee. She opened her eyes and straightened her skirt. They went back to the landing-stage and she said she had to go home for lunch. They arranged to
verse al día siguiente a las once, cuando cerraba la taquilla del cine.

*  

Entró al Kiko's y buscó entre las mesas de tubo y linóleo a sus amigos. Vio de lejos al ciego Macario y se fue a sentar con él. Macario le pidió que metiera un veinte en la sinfonola y al rato llegó Alfredo y los tres pidieron tacos de pollo con guacamole" y cervezas y escucharon la canción que decía «La muy ingrata, se fue y me dejó, sin duda por otro más hombre que yo». Hicieron lo de siempre, que era recordar su adolescencia y hablar de Rosa y Remedios, las muchachas más bonitas del barrio. Macario los picó para que hablaran. Alfredo dijo que los chamacos de hoy sí eran muy duros, de cuchillo y toda la cosa. Ellos no. Viéndolos bien, eran bastante bobos. Recordó cuando la pandilla del Poli los retó a un partido de fútbol nada más para patearles las rodillas y todo terminó en encuentro de box allá en el lote vacío de la calle de Mirto, y Macario se presentó con un bate de beisbol y los del Poli se quedaron fríos al ver cómo les pegaba el ciego con el bate. Macario dijo que desde entonces todos lo aceptaron como cuate y Salvador dijo que fue sobre todo por esas caras que hacía, girando los ojos en blanco y jalándose las orejas para atrás, como para troncharse de la risa. Macario dijo que el que se moría de la risa era él, porque desde los diez años su papá le dijo que no se preocupara, que no tendría que trabajar nunca, que al cabo la jabonera de la que era dueño iba bien, de manera que Macario se dedicó a cultivar su físico para defenderse. Dijo que el radio había sido su escuela y que de allí había sacado sus bromas y sus voces. Luego recordaron a su cuate Raimundo y dejaron de hablar un rato y pidieron más cervezas y Salvador miró hacia la calle y dijo que él y Raimundo caminaban juntos de noche, durante la época de exámenes, de

meet the next day at eleven, when the cinema box-office closed.

*  

He went into Kiko’s and looked for his friends among all the tubular steel, lino-topped tables. He saw blind Macario from a distance and went to sit with him. Macario asked him to put a twenty-centavo piece in the juke-box and soon Alfredo showed up and the three of them ordered chicken pancakes with spicy sauce and beers and listened to the song which went ‘What an ungrateful girl, she went off and left me, no doubt for someone more of a man than me’. They did what they always did, which was to reminisce about their adolescence and talk of Rosa and Remedios, the prettiest girls in their part of town. Macario egged them on to make them talk. Alfredo said that these days the kids were really tough, with knives and all the rest of it. They hadn’t been like that. If you really thought about it, they’d been pretty stupid. He recalled the time Poli’s gang challenged them to a simple football match simply to bash their knees and it had all ended in a boxing match up there on the empty site in Mirto Street, and Macario had turned up with a baseball bat and Poli’s lot were stark terrified as this blind lad set about them with the bat. Macario said that after that they all accepted him as a mate and Salvador said it was mainly because of those faces he could pull, rolling his eyes until only the whites showed and folding his ears back; it was enough to make you split yourself laughing. Macario said he was the one who died laughing because ever since he was ten his father had been telling him not to worry, he’d never have to work, that after all the soap factory he owned was doing well, so Macario concentrated on body-building, so that he’d be able to defend himself. He said the radio had been his school, he’d got all his jokes and voices from it. Then they remembered their mate Raimundo and stopped talking for a bit, and ordered more beers and Salvador looked out into the street and said that he and Raimundo were walking together
regreso a sus casas, y Raimundo le pedía que le explicara bien todo ese enredo del álgebra y luego se detenía un rato en
la esquina de Sullivan y Ramón Guzmán, antes de separarse,
y Raimundo decía:

—¿Sabes una cosa? Me da como miedo pasar de esta
cuadra. Aquí como que termina el barrio. Más lejos ya no sé que pasa. Tú eres mi cuate y por eso te lo cuento. Palabra que
me da miedo pasar de esta cuadra.

Y Alfredo recordó que cuando se recibió, la familia le
regaló el automóvil viejo y todos se fueron a celebrar en
grande recorriendo los cabarets baratos de la ciudad. Iban
muy tomados y Raimundo dijo que Alfredo no sabía
manejar bien y comenzó a forcejar para que Alfredo le
dejará el volante y el coche por poco se volteó en una
glorieta de la Reforma y Raimundo dijo que quería
guacarear19 y la portezuela se abrió y Raimundo cayó a la
avenida y se rompió el cuello.

Pagaron y se despidieron.

* * *

Dio las tres clases de la tarde y acabó con los dedos man-
chados de tiza después de dibujar el mapa de la República
en el pizarrón. Cuando terminó el turno y salieron los
niños, caminó entre los pupitres y se sentó en la última
banca. El único foco colgaba de un largo cordón. Se quedó
mirando los trazos de color que indicaban las sierras, las
vertientes tropicales, los desiertos y la meseta. Nunca había
sido buen dibujante: Yucatán resultaba demasiado grande,
Baja California demasiado corta. El salón olía a serrín y
mochilas de cuero. Cristóbal, el maestro del quinto año,
asomó por la puerta y le dijo: —¿Qué hay?

Salvador caminó hasta el pizarrón y borró el mapa con
un trapo mojado. Cristóbal sacó un paquete de cigarrillos y
los dos fumaron y el piso crujía mientras acomodaban los

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at night, during the exams, on their way home, and Raimundo
asked him to explain all that complicated algebra stuff and
then he stopped a moment on the corner of Sullivan and
Ramón Guzmán streets, before they parted and Raimundo
said:

‘Know something? I feel sort of scared going beyond this
block. This is just about where our part of town ends. Further
on I don’t know what happens. You’re my friend, that’s why
I’m telling you this. I swear I’m scared to go beyond this
block.

And Alfredo recalled that when he passed the exams, his
family gave him an old car and they all went off to celebrate in
style, touring all the cheap night-clubs in town. They were
very drunk and Raimundo said that Alfredo couldn’t drive
well enough and began to struggle so that Alfredo would give
the wheel up to him, and the car almost turned over at a cross-
roads island along Reforma Street and Raimundo said that he
wanted to puke and the door flew open and Raimundo fell into
the avenue and broke his neck.

They paid and said good-bye.

* * *

He taught the three afternoon classes and finished up with his
fingers all covered with chalk after drawing a map of the Re-
public on the board. When the session was over and the chil-
dren had left, he wandered down between the desks and sat
donw in the back row. The only light was hanging on a long
cord. He sat looking at the patches of colour that marked the
mountain ranges, the tropical watersheds, the deserts and the
plateau. He had never been good at drawing; Yucatán had
come out too big, Lower California too short. The room
smelt of sawdust and leather satchels. Cristóbal, the fifth-
form master, looked in through the door and said: ‘What’s
up?’

Salvador went up to the board and rubbed the map off with
a wet rag. Cristóbal got out a packet of cigarettes and they both
smoked and the floor creaked as they put the pieces of chalk
pedazos de tiza en su caja. Se sentaron a esperar y al rato entraron otros maestros y después el director Durán.

El director se sentó en la silla del estrado y los demás en los pupitres y el director los miró a todos con los ojos negros y todos lo miraron a él con su cara morena y su camisa azul y su corbata morada. El director dijo que nadie se moría de hambre y que todo el mundo pasaba trabajos y los maestros se enojaron y uno dijo que ponchaba boletos en un camión después de dar dos turnos y otro que trabajaba de noche en una lonchería de Santa María la Redonda y otro que tenía una miscelánea puesta con sus ahorros y sólo había venido por solidaridad. Durán les dijo que iban a perder la antigüedad, las pensiones y de repente hasta los puestos y les pidió que no se expusieran. Todos se levantaron y salieron y Salvador vio que ya eran las seis y media y corrió a la calle, cruzó corriendo entre el tráfico y abordó un camión.

Bajó en el Zócalo y caminó a la oficina de Olmedo. Toribio le dijo que a las siete entregaban el coche que iba a manejar y que se esperara un rato. Salvador se arrimó a la caseta de despacho y abrió un mapa de la Ciudad de México. Lo estuvo estudiando y después lo cerró y revisó los cuadernos cuadriculados de aritmética.

- ¿Qué es mejor? ¿Ruletear en el centro o en las colonias?
- le preguntó a Toribio.
- Pues lejos del centro vas más de prisa pero también gastas más gasolina. Recuerda que el combustible lo pagas tú.

Salvador rió. - Puede que en las puertas de los hoteles haya gringos que den buenas propinas.
- Ahí viene tu carro - le dijo Toribio desde la caseta.
- ¿Tú eres el nuevo? - gritó el chofer gordifión que lo tripulaba. Se secó el sudor de la frente con un trapo y se bajó del automóvil. Ahí lo tienes. Métele suavecito la primera que a rato se abranca. Cierra tú mismo las puertas o te las rechingan. Ahí te lo encargo.

Salvador se sentó frente a la dirección y guardó los

back in their box. They sat down to wait and soon some other teachers came in and then the headmaster Durán.

The head sat down on the chair on the dais and the rest at the desks and the director looked at them all with his black eyes and they all looked back at him with his dark face and his blue shirt and his purple tie. The director said that no one was dying of hunger and that people everywhere were having difficulties and the masters got angry and one said that he punched tickets on a bus after teaching two sessions and another said he worked at night in a snack bar in Santa María la Redonda and another said he’d set up a small shop with his savings and had only come along to show solidarity. Durán said they’d lose their hopes of promotion, their pensions and quite suddenly even their jobs and asked them not to lay themselves open to it all. They got up and went out and Salvador saw that it was already half past six and he ran into the street, ran across between the traffic and leapt onto a bus.

He got off at Zócalo and walked to Olmedo’s office. Toribio said they’d hand over the car he was to drive at seven, and told him to wait a little. Salvador leant against the office booth and opened a map of Mexico City. He studied it for a bit and then closed it and marked some squared-paper arithmetic exercise-books.

'What's best? To drive about in the centre or in the suburbs?' he asked Toribio.

'Well, away from the centre you go faster but you also use more petrol. Remember it is you who pay for the gas.'

Salvador laughed. 'Maybe there'll be some yankees at hotel doors who'll give good tips.'

'Here comes your car,' said Toribio from the booth.

'Are you the new bloke?' shouted the chubby driver who was manning it. He wiped the sweat off his forehead with a rag and got out of the car. 'Here she is. Go gently when you put her into first, she sometimes sticks. And close the doors yourself or they'll ruin them. Over to you then.'

Salvador sat down behind the wheel and put the excercise-
books in the dash-board. He wiped the greasy steering-wheel with a rag. The seat was warm. He got out and wiped the windscreen. He got in again and adjusted the mirror to his eye-level. He started off. He put up the 'For Hire' sign. His hands were sweating. He set off down the Avenue of the Twentieth of November. Straightaway a man stopped him and told him to take him to the Cosmos cinema.

The man got out at the cinema and Cristóbal leant in through the car window and said: 'It's a miracle.' Salvador asked him what he was up to and Cristóbal said he was going to Señor Flores Carranza's printing shop in the Ribera de San Cosme and Salvador offered to take him and Cristóbal got into the taxi but he said it wasn't to be a free trip among friends; he'd pay. Salvador laughed and said that was all he needed. They talked about boxing and decided to go together to the Mexico Arena on Friday. Salvador told him about the girl he'd met that morning. Cristóbal started to talk about the fifth-form kids and they arrived at the printing shop and Salvador parked and they got out.

They went in through the narrow door and down the long dark passage. The printing shop was at the far end and Señor Flores Carranza met them and Cristóbal asked if the leaflets were ready yet. The printer took off his eye-shade and nodded and showed him the sheet with black and red print calling for a strike. The assistants handed over the four packets. Salvador took two packets and moved off while Cristóbal paid the bill.

He walked down the long dark passage. From far away, the noise of the cars going along the Ribera de San Cosme reached him. Half-way down the passage he felt a hand on his shoulder and someone said: 'Gently, gently.'

'Excuse me,' said Salvador. 'It's very dark in here.'

'Dark? Just wait, it's going to get pitch-black.'

The man put a cigarette between his lips and smiled and Salvador simply said 'Good evening, señor', but the hand came down again on his shoulder and the bloke said he must
EL COSTA DE LA VIDA

be about the only little school-teacher who didn’t know who he was and Salvador started to get angry and said he was in a hurry and the bloke said: "The H.T.; you know? That’s who I am."

Salvador saw that four cigarettes were lit up at the end of the passage, at the entrance to the building, and he pressed the packets to his chest and looked behind him and another cigarette lit up by the doorway of the printing shop.

"The H.T., the Holy Terror. Surely you must have heard people talk about me."

Salvador was beginning to see in the darkness and he made out the man’s hat and the hand that took one of the packets.

"He was real polite introducing himself. Give over the papers, little school-teacher."

Salvador shook off the hand and retreated a few steps. The cigarette from behind was coming closer. A damp draught was creeping through the passage, at about ankle level. Salvador looked around him.

"Let me pass."

"Let’s have those leaflets."

"They’re staying with me, stupid."

He felt the burning tip of the cigarette behind very close to the back of his neck. Then Cristóbal’s cry. He hurled one of the packets and with his free arm hit the man in the face. He felt the cigarette as he smashed it and the burning tip on his fist. And then he saw the face, streaked with red saliva, coming closer. Salvador spun round with clenched fists and saw the knife and then felt it in his stomach.

The man slowly pulled the knife out and clicked his fingers and Salvador fell with his mouth open.