

climate had become tropical and there were aggressive mosquitoes and bananas on all sides. The last stretch, during which I dozed, trying to cope with a decent asthma attack, was asphalted properly and seemed to be quite pretty (it was dark by then). As we arrived at our destination the sky was lightening. I was absolutely wrecked. I fell into a bed we rented for half a *bolívar* and slept like a tiger, aided by the substantial adrenalin injection given to me by Alberto.



ESTE EXTRAÑO SIGLO VEINTE this strange twentieth century

The worst of my asthma attack has now passed and I feel almost well, though sometimes I resort to my new acquisition, a French inhaler. I feel Alberto's absence so sharply. It seems like my flanks are unguarded from some hypothetical attack. At every other moment I'm turning around to share an observation with him only to realize he's not there.

It's true, there's not really much to complain about: thoroughly looked after, good food and a lot of it, and the anticipation of returning home to start studying again and to complete the degree which will enable me to practise. Yet the idea of splitting up definitively doesn't make me completely happy; the many months we've been side by side, through good and bad, accustomed to dreaming similar dreams in similar situations, have brought us so much closer together. With these ideas constantly turning over in my mind, I find myself drifting away from the center of Caracas. The homes in

the suburbs are spaced much further apart. Caracas extends along the length of a narrow valley, enclosing and restraining it on its edges, so that on a short walk you'll be climbing the surrounding hills, and there, with the progressive city laid out before your feet, you'll begin to see a new aspect of its multifaceted makeup. The blacks, those magnificent examples of the African race who have maintained their racial purity thanks to their lack of an affinity with bathing, have seen their territory invaded by a new kind of slave: the Portuguese. And the two ancient races have now begun a hard life together, fraught with bickering and squabbles. Discrimination and poverty unite them in the daily fight for survival but their different ways of approaching life separate them completely: the black is indolent and a dreamer; spending his meager wage on frivolity or drink; the European has a tradition of work and saving, which has pursued him as far as this corner of America and drives him to advance himself, even independently of his own individual aspirations.

At this elevation the concrete houses have totally disappeared and only adobe huts reign. I peer into one of them. It is a room half separated by a partition, with a fireplace and table and a heap of straw on the ground, apparently serving as beds. Various bony cats and a mangy dog play with three completely naked black children. Rising from the fire, acrid smoke fills the room. The black mother, frizzy hair and sagging breasts, is cooking, assisted by a girl of about 15, who is dressed. At the door of the hut we get into a conversation and after a while I ask if they will pose for a photo, which they categorically refuse to do unless I give it to them straight away. In vain I try to explain that I have to develop it first, but no, they want it then and there, or no ball game. Eventually I promise to hand it over straight away, but now they are suspicious and don't want to cooperate. One of the kids escapes to play with his friends while I continue chatting with the family. In the end, I stand guard at the door, camera in hand, pretending to snap anyone who pokes

out their head. We play around like this for a while until I see the little kid returning carefree on a new bicycle; I focus and press the button but the effect is disastrous. To elude the photo, the kid swerves and falls to the ground, bursting into tears. Immediately they all lose their fear of the camera and rush out to hurl abuse at me. I withdraw somewhat apprehensively because they are excellent stone throwers, followed by the insults of the group — including the height of contempt: “Portuguese.”

Littered along the edges of the road are containers for transporting cars, used by the Portuguese as dwellings. In one of these, where a black family lives, I can just glimpse a brand new refrigerator, and from many of them radios blare music which their owners play at maximum volume. New cars are parked outside the most miserable “homes.” All kinds of aircraft pass overhead, sowing the air with noise and silver reflections and there, at my feet, lies Caracas, city of the eternal spring. Its center is threatened by the invasion of red tiled roofs that converge with the flat roofs of modern buildings. But something else will allow the yellowy color of its colonial buildings to live on, even after they have disappeared from the city maps: the spirit of Caracas, impervious to the lifestyle of the North and stubbornly rooted in the retrograde semi-pastoral conditions of its colonial past.



ACOTACIÓN AL MARGEN a note in the margin

The stars drew light across the night sky in that little mountain village, and the silence and the cold made the darkness vanish away. It was — I don't know how to explain it — as if everything solid melted away into the ether, eliminating all individuality and absorbing us, rigid, into the immense darkness. Not a single cloud to lend perspective to the space blocked any portion of the starry sky. Less than a few meters away the dim light of a lamp lost its power to fade the darkness.

The man's face was indistinct in the shadows; I could only see what seemed like the spark of his eyes and the gleam of his four front teeth.

I still can't say whether it was the atmosphere or the personality of that individual that prepared me for the revelation, but I know that many times and from many different people I had heard those same arguments and that they had never made an impression on me. Our interlocutor was, in fact, a very interesting character. From a country in Europe, he escaped the knife of dogmatism as a young man, he knew the taste of fear (one of the few experiences which makes you value life), and afterwards he had wandered from country to country, gathering thousands of adventures, until he and his bones finally ended up in this isolated region, patiently waiting for the moment of great reckoning to arrive.

After exchanging a few meaningless words and platitudes, each of us marking territory, the discussion began to falter and we were about to go our separate ways, when he let out his idiosyncratic,

childlike laugh, highlighting the asymmetry of his four front incisors:

The future belongs to the people, and gradually, or in one strike, they will take power, here and in every country.

The terrible thing is the people need to be educated, and this they cannot do before taking power, only after. They can only learn at the cost of their own mistakes, which will be very serious and will cost many innocent lives. Or perhaps not, maybe those lives will not have been innocent because they will have committed the huge sin against nature; meaning, a lack of ability to adapt. All of them, those unable to adapt — you and I, for example — will die cursing the power they helped, through great sacrifice, to create. Revolution is impersonal; it will take their lives, even utilizing their memory as an example or as an instrument for domesticating the youth who follow them. My sin is greater because I, more astute and with greater experience, call it what you like, will die knowing that my sacrifice stems only from an inflexibility symbolizing our rotten civilization, which is crumbling. I also know — and this won't alter the course of history or your personal view of me — that you will die with a clenched fist and a tense jaw, the epitome of hatred and struggle, because you are not a symbol (some inanimate example) but a genuine member of the society to be destroyed; the spirit of the beehive speaks through your mouth and motivates your actions. You are as useful as I am, but you are not aware of how useful your contribution is to the society that sacrifices you.

I saw his teeth and the cheeky grin with which he foretold history, I felt his handshake and, like a distant murmur, his formal goodbye. The night, folding in at contact with his words, overtook me again, enveloping me within it. But despite his words, I now knew... I knew that when the great guiding spirit cleaves humanity into two antagonistic halves, I would be with the people. I know this, I see it printed in the night sky that I, eclectic dissembler of doctrine and psychoanalyst of dogma, howling like one possessed, will assault

the barricades or the trenches, will take my bloodstained weapon and, consumed with fury, slaughter any enemy who falls into my hands. And I see, as if a great exhaustion smothers this fresh exaltation, I see myself, immolated in the genuine revolution, the great equalizer of individual will, proclaiming the ultimate *mea culpa*. I feel my nostrils dilate, savoring the acrid smell of gunpowder and blood, the enemy's death; I steel my body, ready to do battle, and prepare myself to be a sacred space within which the bestial howl of the triumphant proletariat can resound with new energy and new hope.