

# The Octopus Wars

*The Collected Fictions of Ezequiel Morsella*



# *The Octopus Wars*

To the best of my knowledge, all of the following stories are true.  
Hence, this is really a book of history

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## Last Voyage to Coronado<sup>1</sup>

On my eighth birthday Grandma made gnocchi bolognese, and Uncle Isidro, known to many as “the Spinach,” took the time to teach me something which he considered to be very important. The Spinach, a poor gambler and small time rip-off artist, wore an old felt hat that had become less and less greenish as the years passed, but that’s not how he earned the name. “Romi,” he said to me, “it’s now time that you learn something about this life, and don’t worry,” he interjected, “I’m not going to bring up how I was right in taking Uncle Monti’s money.” At that point he scratched the bottom of his chin and said, “Listen and observe carefully, and make sure that your innocent mother isn’t around.” Before I had a chance to scout the area, the Spinach looked left to right as if being overly cautious was a habit learned from having been caught so many times saying so many bad things. Unfortunately, many of the things that the Spinach said were true, especially this time.

He handed me a poorly wrapped package with gold strings all about it. I could tell that he had wrapped it himself, which immediately aroused my suspicion, for men in this family don’t wrap anything unless they’re up to something shady. “Happy Birthday!” said the Spinach. I began unwrapping the gift with that easily elicited excitement of youth, only to find that the box was empty.

“What’s the idea?” I asked.

“How do you feel?”

“Bad, I guess.”

“Well,” he said, “if you learn to deal with this, with this feeling you have right now, and if you learn to deal with disappointments, one after another, you’ll be one of the few who are content in this miserable world, in this wretched life. Do you understand what I mean? One day you’ll thank me, for I gave you the best gift you could ever receive.” Though I responded in the affirmative, I never really understood what he meant until ten years later, when my story begins.

Maybe the events to be disclosed occurred because the afternoon was too long that day in the city of Mendoza. The province of vineyards, mountains, and condors rested underneath a vernal sun which gave its immigrants no choice but to accept their new reality: that they walked, slept, and ate in the southern cone of a new and distant continent, far away from Europe, far away from the world. “How could it be that we are

actually closer to Antarctica than to Italy?” they pondered as they shook their heads.

Crazy Kohl, Puchito, Eledro, Fat Grono, and I squandered many hours at the Café Astoria, the unofficial social and political center of the city. The Astoria was frequented by all of Mendoza’s residents, young and old, but we, the “Young Bohemians,” as they called us, made it an art form. By the purchase of one cup of coffee in the morning, we could kill hours into the evening, always holding our favorite table out in the front and left of the entrance. We pretended to be experts on everything, as all good Argentine charlatans. We would comment and critique matters of art, history, philosophy, literature, and invariably our discussions would end on the topic of that great war occurring far way, that great war involving everyone, but us boludos [schmucks]. The truth is that, underneath all the sanata [donkey dust] we were doing what all young men have always done and—I am proud to say—will always do: fish for minas [girls]. Some cast their lines more than others, and some appeared not to cast at all (for example, the painter Strack), but we were all fishing in one form or another, whether that be trolling, fly-fishing, or just sit-and-wait fishing.

Some of the more distinguished regulars, such as the young but respected artist Lars Strack, did not speak so much. Strack would sit at a table and gently sketch out the surroundings, drawing a tree here and a coffee mug there. That day he happened to be drawing an Astoria chair which had a stylish maroon-on-black italicized *A* painted on the back. On the chair sat a fat, amorphous man, with the semblance of any old Italian who had had his share of cannelloni and Pampa beef. Puchito commented that the picture should be titled, *Fat Pigeon on the Ledge*, or better yet, *Waiting for Death and More Gnocchi*. Strack smiled and softly replied that titling pictures should be left to writers, who spend their time writing, and not to painters, who have chosen to paint instead.

“That’s interesting, and you have a good argument,” replied Puchito, “but you should call it *Waiting for Death* anyway.”

The most beautiful women of Mendoza invariably gathered around the young Strack. No matter how many in number, he would never lose his concentration. This was perhaps his patented fishing technique, though I must admit that technique played a small role in his social success.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally appeared in *Italian Americana*, Summer 2001.

The Bohemians idolized Strack, and we always watched him work from a deferential distance, not wanting to spoil his operation. Strack had all the qualities of a desirable man. He was handsome in a boyish yet elegant way, and his maturity intrigued everyone. In short, he was the Anti-Spinach. Apart from having the right *facha* [face] and perfect manner, he had the power to immortalize the beauty of any given woman by throwing a few lines here and there, or just as effective, that's what the minas believed. In this rare case, it did not matter that his family was rich and from Germany. We were proud that such a specimen existed in our dull and transparent sex. I sometimes wonder if the café was big enough for two Stracks.

To all at the Astoria it was implicitly acknowledged that Crazy Kohl, the slender gentleman with the slicked back hair, was the indisputable leader of the Young Bohemians, though no Bohemian would dare attest to it, for such a thing is against the whole philosophy.

Crazy Kohl, too, was an artist of sorts. It had been rumored—as always, by somebody's aunt—that on his sixteenth birthday, Kohl had painted a huge skull on the wall of his bedroom. The depiction was far from accurate, with its two large, peering eyeballs and a long, salivating tongue. Unfortunately, this whim of his cost him sixteen nights of good sleep and spoiled whatever diplomatic favor he could ever find in Grono's father. First he complained about nightmares involving the skull. Then he said that at precisely 2:40 am on each night the eyes of the presence would shift from left to right until fixating upon his innocent self, saying "KOHHHHL" in a deep voice, over and over. The worst was when the nefarious tongue of the thing would try to steal his bed sheets. The nightmares persisted even after he and Fat Grono covered the skull with six cans worth of black shoe polish. From this and many other incidents—all of which were true—Kohl acquired the most honorable of Argentine appellations: Crazy.

At our table, underneath the maroon-and-black Astoria canopy, Eledro, the "voice" of the Bohemians, began to relate last night's incident. Kohl and Puchito had successfully "made their presence known" at our local theater, the Bolsa. "Making your presence known" at the Bolsa required preparation, at least by Bohemian standards. There are two Visitors, a herald and receiver, who must first watch the target film several times so that the plot is flawlessly learned. Then the most climactic scene of the movie must be identified and timed using a stopwatch. Kohl calculated that, in roughly 86% of the films, the most climactic scene is a romantic one. After all preparations, the Visitors must let their presence be

known on a Friday or Saturday night, which goes something like Eledro's account, though his accounts always seemed to be more interesting than the truth.

As Eledro told it, Kohl sat in the front row, the ideal place for a receiver. (Kohl was a perfectionist, a trait always attributed to his German background.) Two-and-a-half minutes before the target scene, Puchito entered the Bolsa and stood at the back row of the dark theater. In this film the scene happened to be a classy one in which a young maiden disrobes before her lover for the first time. After another two-and-a-half minutes, Puchito initiated the Visitation by calling out through a bottomless tin can, "Torete, are you in here? Are you in this large, dark place?"

Naturally, shouts of protest from the disturbed patrons filled the smokey air of the Bolsa. Kohl estimated that 60% of the audience was saying something to the effect of "Shut up" or "We're trying to watch the movie," and 20% was saying something worse. The Bolsa was not as refined an establishment as its guests wanted it to be. Most of the glittered green seat backs were torn, and the bodies resting upon them, if provoked, did not act at all like Cary Grant.

"I am here, Pepino," replied Kohl, shamelessly oblivious to the pleas of the audience. "I'm up here at the front row. Can you hear me?"

"What?" said Puchito, "Was that Torete, Torete who replied to me?"

The rage in the audience grew like swells in the ocean. Every once in a while, one of the more sophisticated audience members—usually an indignant young woman—would utter some moral lesson about having respect for others, or about how people waited all week to see the Hollywood premier, and so on and so forth. These were the true casualties of the Visitation, and they, not the fat Italian asleep in the seventh row, rendered such missions honorable.

Amongst all the complaints, Puchito's annoying metallic voice could still be discerned. His voice was obnoxiously metallic even without the tin can, and it was because of this otherwise undesirable physical and social trait that Kohl chose him as herald. His thin build, spiked red hair, and fiery temper earned him the name "Puchito"—small cigarette.

"Mom said that you forgot to flush the toilet, and that the chain, that chain the lifts the plug, broke, so . . ." vociferated Puchito.

"Tell mom that I have a special paper clip that I can use—can you hear me?—that I can join the plug with the thing that . . . and tell mom not to let anyone in the bathroom until I get home, especially Grandma . . ."

“Would you just go home and flush that damn toilet! And what the hell kind of name is Pepino?” yelled a robust man who was accompanied by a petit young lady. The lady, speaking with the speed of a machine gun, reproached the fat man for making a scene. At this point, fights of this sort usually ignited amongst the couples, who were in disagreement as to how to deal with the disturbance. Generally speaking, the mina would tell the guy that he either overreacted or underreacted; the guy would tell her to mind her own business; and after a few more interchanges, all hell would break loose. The Bohemians called this the *Domino Effect*. After five minutes, and after the scene had past with rage and without love, Puchito and Kohl escaped the Bolsa through different exits, exactly as planned.

The Bohemians sat at the Astoria showing no pride about last night’s success, for such pride would be against the whole philosophy. Eledro added, “It was a successful Visitation, with a Domino Effect.”

Crazy Kohl made an important observation, “The less outrageous the contents of our communication, that is, the more acceptable our disturbance, the greater the Domino Effect will be.” Puchito and I commented that that was a true and invaluable insight. Only Kohl’s powerful brain could reach such conclusions. Fat Grono, known for his dedication to the Bohemians but not for his intelligence, asked, “Did that thing happen when all the guys and girls get into a fight after the Visitation?” Grono had a way of asking that very question which illustrated to everyone that he missed the point entirely. “Yes, Grono,” replied Kohl. Kohl often mentioned that Fat Grono was the only true Bohemian, and even though nobody really knew what that meant, it was respected.

Time had passed, and the sun was now directly over the Astoria. The Bohemians were beginning to feel sleepy when suddenly, to the surprise of everyone at the cafe, Max von Hassmann showed up on his motorcycle, wearing his famous black cape, and having his only companion, Faust the Siamese cat, peering from the sidecar. Looking more like chihuahua than cat, Faust was a sophisticated little feline, who never showed signs of fear or unease, even when being driven at 90 mph by the German madman. Hassmann, known to everyone as “the Kaiser,” was always thought to be an odd ball who made a big entrance, but he was also believed to have died six years ago, in a duel over a woman. This was his greatest entrance ever. Nevertheless, no one at the Astoria displayed shock or said a thing, as always.

The Kaiser got off his motorcycle and said in broken Spanish, “For those of you who are interested in witnessing an important and noble declaration, I will be back in two hours to take you to Coronado.” He and Faust then sped away on the loud vehicle.

The patrons of the Astoria reacted in different ways to the Kaiser’s invitation, depending on age, I think. At one end of the spectrum was Don Pellegrino, the Astoria owner, who mumbled something to the effect of “crazy son of a bitch.” At the other extreme were the Young Bohemians, who saw the invitation as an opportunity to see Coronado and “learn more about the mysterious past of the great Kaiser,” added Kohl.

But before any important decisions were ever made, the Bohemians always consulted the Professor, an old eccentric who sat in the deep interior of the Astoria, where there was never enough light to read. The Professor always had on his table several books, three Egyptian statuettes, and a globe of the world. Nobody really knew what he was a professor of.

“I see you are interested in seeing the Great Town of Coronado, the town in the Andes,” said the Professor. “And I am sure that you have come to ask me, Egio Elfemore Rivarolla, for advice about going. Am I right?”

The Professor had a way of saying every little thing as if it were extremely important. We never heard Coronado spoken about with such gravitas. We all nodded our heads and found chairs.

“Of course I am right,” he said, “and of course you will go, for youth will always seek adventure; it is a fact of life. Things don’t change. Young hearts seek adventure, and adventure they will find, even in Mendoza, even in the Astoria, even at the Bolsa. The desire to have things happen *is* the adventure. But beware, for such desires are safe *here*, but not *there* in the Andes.” He stood and pointed to the west. Grono looked toward the mountains.

“And let me go on to clarify that there is no such thing as ‘*the Andes*’—at least not what you envision them to be. I’ll tell you what there is: there are elevations of land produced by the collision of continental plates, collisions which occurred by a mistake made millions of years ago.”

Grono made a face revealing how hopelessly lost he was in the conversation, but the Professor continued anyway.

“There is rock, soil, quartz, and sand, and some forms of life, but no ‘Andes.’ Yet, when youthful eyes such as yours gaze upon these mountains, the Andes become alive. The condors reawaken and leave their large nests, taking flight into the cool moonlight. The

lioness becomes restlessly hungry, and the phospor which the uneducated *campesino* calls “the bad light” begin to seduce and confuse the weak mind of man, the mind that can’t tolerate large skies and dark mountains. This is why we have lost so many young men to the Andes, but the old men always return. So go, but go with the hearts of old men.”

“And what do you know of the Kaiser?” asked Kohl.

“Max von Hassmann is the son of a famous general from the Great War, a war before your time. If I recall correctly, his name was Wilhelm von Hassmann. In any case, his son is the victim of small-town mentality and of the rumors of old hags, hags who have nothing better to do than gossip while sipping their afternoon *maté*, hags who, without the aid of any hallucinogens, imagine duels which never took place. Would you believe that the young German was presumed dead just because he went to live in San Juan for six years?”

That was enough information for Kohl, who decided at that moment to take the voyage to Coronado. He thought it would be good for the Bohemians to leave the city for a few days. Fat Grono went home to obtain the necessary provisions, which always included olives, bread, and a large stick of dried salami. Puchito went to borrow a few bottles of malbec from his father’s cellar. “With the hearts of old men...with the hearts of old men,” Kohl reminded the Bohemians.

We met the Kaiser outside the Astoria precisely two hours after his invitation: he was punctual like all Germans worth their ilk. There were five of us—Kohl, Puchito, Eledro, Grono, and I, and so we had trouble fitting on and around the Kaiser’s motorcycle and sidecar. Kohl came up with a solution. He would sit behind the Kaiser on the motorcycle; Grono and I would share the sidecar; and Puchito and Eledro (the lightest of us all) would share a black wagon that Kohl had chained to the motorcycle. Quiet Faust was in a beige backpack carried by Kohl. Throughout all deliberations and preparations, neither the Kaiser nor his feline emitted a sound. We rode off toward the Andes at around 40 mph, due to the heavy load.

The late afternoon was beautiful, and all that could be heard or seen was our vehicle blowing dust into the air. Everyone was quiet, and we all acquired that imperturbable zombie facha that all travelers have.

I looked to my left and saw a large vineyard. “How peaceful is the life of a grape picker,” I said to Grono. Then I looked to my right and saw that Grono was anxiously waiting to tell me something.

“What is it, Grono?” I asked.

“Look at the Kaiser. He has a very strange smile,” he said.

Strange it was. I never saw a face containing so much happiness, but happiness of the sad type, the type tangos are made of. It must have been elicited by the natural beauty of Mendoza’s vineyards, I thought. Hassmann scanned the rows of grape vines, up and down, over and over. The rest of us looked as well, but we couldn’t find what made his blissful experience.

It was only when we reached a rivulet that the Kaiser uttered a word. Though nobody understood what the madman was saying, we all knew that it wasn’t pleasant. Apparently, he was cursing at the sky. In cannon-like blasts he would utter the same expression, maybe changing one or two words. We implicitly concluded that if Faust, his closest companion, remained indifferent to this, then so should we. After several hours, we reached the serpentine roads by which we would climb into the Andes and reach the town of Coronado.

The sun of our afternoon had disappeared, and no moon could yet be seen. The sky belonged to no one. The amber lights of the town of Coronado were in view, and we approached them slowly. It was a real small town, purportedly made up of only those who worked down in the vineyards. To everyone’s surprise except the Kaiser, not a soul was there. Wires ran from rooftop to rooftop, suspending light bulbs which served as the town’s only source of illumination. We saw abandoned homes, empty grocery stores, and a vacated police station that was painted in a color between blue and green. The motorcycle became louder now that it echoed through the empty buildings. Puchito noted that the town had no church. “This is a miserable town,” said Eledro from the wagon, “I will tell people that Coronado is a piece of crap; I can’t believe the professor—mentioning ‘*the city in the Andes*’ with such gravitas!” The Kaiser drove us directly to the *Coronado Municipal Cemetery*, where Grono immediately lost control of his bladder. It wasn’t the type of trip we had imagined. Not at all.

Once the motor of his motorcycle stopped, our hearing was restored. Following the lead of the young German, we entered the abandoned cemetery through rusty iron gates. Slowly he marched to one of the few marked graves, upon which he fixated upon a sacred marble that read “W. V. HASSMANN.” Weeds hugged the stone as if protecting it.

We all stood there for seven long minutes, until Max von Hassmann produced his second Spanish utterance of the day.

“You low, miserable bastard!” he said, spitting on the ground. “You be good witnesses,” he said to us. “Do not be like the people of San Juan who lost discipline after only six years of coming here. What lies below is a man who has taken all from his son—his son’s glory, his son’s wealth, and closest to his son’s good heart, his son’s Camilla Piquielo, my little grape picker. No! fame was not enough for this charming man, the great Herr Hassmann! He had to have it all!”

The Kaiser then dropped to his knees, and with tears and two fists in the air, said, “How could you be such a bastard to your own blood?! Let the whole world know the truth. Let the night and the Andes know my scorn and hatred! And that is why I have been bringing witnesses here every week for the last six years, no matter how far the distance, no matter how long the time, no matter how much the fuel.” A noise from the wagon startled us, but we could see that it was just Faust, who casually walked up to the tombstone and pissed on the grave, as if he had pissed on it many times before.

Confused and perplexed, Kohl’s pupils cyclically dilated and constricted, a symptom of his deep thought. One could almost read the machinations inside his head, and we all knew that, if anyone understood what all this was about, it would be Kohl. “Are the old hags who lack hallucinogens right? Was the Professor wrong? Is this the result of some father-and-son duel over a woman—a vineyard girl by the name of Ms. Piquelo? Did this maiden fall in love with the Kaiser’s father because the elder had more fame and charm? Where is she today? Is she alive?” thought Crazy Kohl. Despite all the mystery, no one asked any questions, at least not out loud.

The Kaiser soon regained his presence of mind, and without any words, we all started heading back to our city, which we already missed very much. Again we passed through the rusty iron gates of the cemetery.

Underneath the moonlight, as the Kaiser angrily rode his vehicle through the Andes, the silhouettes of hundreds of giant condors could be seen atop the mountains, flanking our right. They were perched side by side, as if in military formation, as if waiting for some signal. I never saw anything like it. The Bohemians were terrified by this newly discovered state of affairs, but they said nothing and maintained their travel facha. In less than fifteen seconds, the giant condors took flight, ascending toward the flickering stars. Their wingspan must have been more than twenty feet. We all watched in awe as they launched in different directions. The beasts dominated the skies—

they were in their element, and we were miles from ours.

“Did you hear that?” asked Kohl, “I heard the word ‘YETZT’ fill the skies one second before the animals took flight, but I can’t tell where the sound originated, nor do I know what it means.” Grono and I did not hear a thing, but we never doubted Kohl.

The shadows of the giant condors circled around us. Our speed was now reduced to 29 mph. In the middle of nowhere, we were as vulnerable as a shell-less snail in a cobweb. Astonishingly, the Kaiser remained completely unaware of the creatures. But this did not last long. Noticeable to all and with a loud shriek, one of the giant beasts dove down and tried to snatch the innocent Faust from the beige bag. Faust showed no fear, as always. Fortunately, Puchito hit the huge beast on the head with Grono’s dried salami. As soon as we thought that we had ourselves a victory, we saw seven condors take the body of Max von Hassmann up into the night. As he ascended toward the moon, the Kaiser kicked and cursed, saying “*Mundo de mierda!*” Without its driver, the motorcycle decelerated, and Kohl stared straight at the Andes and said, “You may not believe this, but the beast had the face of a German general. I saw it right before my eyes... ‘Yetzt’ must be German for something.” No one had the time to understand what Kohl meant.

Fat Grono took the wheel and, now that the wagon was ditched, managed to raise our speed up to 50 mph, but we soon realized that we had ourselves another casualty. Faust was gone. The feline was taken by two condors but did not complain at all, and so no one noticed a thing.

“Perhaps he wanted to go up with his commander,” said Puchito.

“One has to respect that they went to their death being who they always were—the Kaiser bitching, and the cat with no complaints,” said Kohl. Immediately, the condors vanished into the mountains, as if their mission had been accomplished.

It wasn’t until we reached the rivulet that things seemed substantially less ominous. But something unreal and quite sublime happened at the vineyards, right before dawn. Eleven of the “bad lights” that Professor Rivarolla spoke about were there, but they looked like beautiful, voluptuous young women. They were playing around on the fields, and all had the same Italian facha. Of course Grono stopped the motorcycle, and we all began to run between the rows of green grapes, chasing the apparitions. (I remember that the grapes looked gray in the nightlight.) After several games of hide-and-seek, Puchito tried to hug one of the

maidens and fell right through her body. “Wench!” he said. The same happened to Fat Grono, who years later claimed that it was the best opportunity of his life.

“We must evacuate immediately. I understand what is going on,” said Kohl while starting the motor motorcycle. “The hags must have been somewhat right about the Kaiser, but the Professor was even more right about the Andes. It is all in the geography, *and* the observor. Don’t attempt to touch the eleven Camilla Piquelo’s, for they did not spring from your minds. They were created while the Kaiser was remembering his lost love, soon after leaving the Astoria. And those

flying monsters north of the rivulet must have been born from his insatiable rage. “Poor Kaiser. Too bad that he did not drive slower toward Coronado. He may have lived to see his lost love instead of the condors. I guess the Andes, like all things, need time.”

And nobody except me understood.

We returned to the Astoria conspicuously lacking the Kaiser and his companion, but as always, no one asked any questions. Looking back I think that the Kaiser was not prepared to deal with this wretched life. He lacked the training I received from Uncle Isidro, the Spinach.



## Catface Laguna

“What I’m going to tell you is true, but you punks won’t believe it,” said Catface while sitting on a crate of onions. After serving octopus and milanesas all day, the old waiter with the face of a cat and the stomach of a pig was not eager to tell the Young Bohemians the story they desired to hear most, but they pressed on and offered him a bottle of his favorite, Averna, which he always needed at this time of night, “to kill the nightmares brought on by the veal,” he would say. Most of the immigrants in Mendoza were families from Naples, Calabria, or Sicily, but old Catface was Venetian and arrived in Argentina suspiciously alone. Again and again, he would tell his patrons that he refused a good job at the vineyards so that he could become a waiter at *El Pinguino*, where he could “touch an octopus and remember the saltwater of my homeland.” He made up all sorts of stories to earn tips, and was even credited with saying, “the best lie is true to its creator,” so the Bohemians never fell for his bullshit. All they knew was that those squinty eyes and skilled tongue had witnessed something very special in Venice, and they were going to get it out of him even if only half of what he said was true. Crazy Kohl poured him a glass of the dark liquor, and Catface looked on, slowly taking it with his left hand and closing his eyes.

“Maybe one day you young men will see her—Venezia, with her serpentine canals and storybook bridges,” he said, pronouncing all s’s as sh’s. He gulped down half of the drink and rested the glass on his perfectly round stomach. “But beneath all of the beauty lurks a real horror, one that is beyond human understanding. You are going to ask ‘Why?’ and ‘How can this be?’, but not all things can be explained. And that’s the way it should be—*beauty with horror*, for beauty is the only place where horror can hide. I am not speaking about the rats that swim in the night waters, nor about the masked corpses resting in the cool chambers of San Zaccaria.”

The Bohemians stepped back from Catface, whose countenance took a sudden change of expression after saying the words “beauty and horror.” His eyes now gleamed like black marbles. “Is it the moon, the Averna, or the memory to be told that has awakened the heart of old Catface?” thought Crazy Kohl, Puchito, Eledro, and nervous Fat Grono, who had eaten nothing all day and was now not allowed to touch any of the food in the kitchen. Kohl made sure that Eledro was taking notes in his book.

“Unseen by all and heard by none,” continued Catface, spreading his hands out into the air, “every

night the Translusor would walk aimlessly through the canals of Venice, looking for some thing to quench the loneliness of the deep. With wide peering eyeballs and naked clammy limbs, the zombie beast would traverse the murky, moonlit waters of Venezia, his white fingers grazing the cold buildings that were his walls, and his large feet stepping on a bed of fungus here and there—all parts of him longing for the heat of the living. Yet, if you were in a gondola and the Translusor were one meter to the side and one below you, you would never see or hear a thing but the rustling of the cool, black waters. If you were lucky, he would probably walk on . . . dead, but moving forward nonetheless.”

“How could he breath underwater?” asked Kohl, who always had a scientific propensity. Fat Grono, standing with a blank stare, began to experience the forerunner of downright terror.

“Every once in a while his white arms would thrust through the water’s surface to bring down human blood, which he hugged and murdered slowly, by drowning. The extinguished life force would temporarily warm the waters, at least long enough to keep him moving for just one more night. A nun by the name of Sister Paranax was the first to see the white arms extend into the night—looking for gondolas, looking for the life force. She thought it was the devil.

“Do you young men want to know who found a way to capture the water beast?” asked the Venetian.

“Let me guess,” asked Puchito, “Sister Paranax?”

“No, my young smart ass, it was Catface Laguna who found a way. After hours of deep thought, I came up with a plan. I said to all the gondoliers, ‘Let us all on the night of the full moon take our boats out and fill the canals so that not one of square meter of water can be seen. Then, when the church bells mark twelve o’clock, let us all at once thrust our ores deep into the water. Whoever hits something fleshy and moving, yell ‘Translusor! Translusor!’ like you never yelled before. But be careful that he doesn’t find you first.’

“And so it happened on a motionless night. No one would have suspected that anything was lurking out there, but we, being men of the water, knew very well, the way that a fisherman knows that a great school of fish moved nearby, the way the astronomer knows when comets will arrive. Sister Paranax blessed the boats, and our flotilla headed out, covering all the veins of the Gran Canal. There were so many boats out that the water could not be seen. The night was still, but we were all set for action, from San Marco all the way to

San Michele. Then the bells went dong dong, and all of Italy could hear our ores thrusting into the quiet waters of Venice. Splashing went on and on, until, off in the distance, the echo of the infamous name could be heard, ‘Translusor! Translusor!’ A Genoese boy by the name of Pusuelo found the monster under a bridge.

“By foot and boat we all rushed to the site, which was a dark canaletto off the Rialto. Four gondoliers kept thrusting their ores in-and-out of the water, poking at the unseen beast, but the mindless Translusor, bruised and scarred, kept moving on, heading for the Gran Canal, where he could easily escape into the ocean. ‘No one jump in the water!’ I said to everyone. One of the us threw a rope in the water, but failed to wrap it around the beast. ‘Why hadn’t we set up a trap?’ I remember asking myself. For one hour we all followed the Translusor toward the Gran Canal, where the waters were rough. A few boats capsized (not gondolas, of course). We lost some men that night.”

Catface becrossed himself and dropped his head, which was covered by just three thick hairs.

“But then we all pushed on even more, searching for the monster that had already killed scores of Venetians. Only with the strength of three boats and twenty men was the Translusor finally roped and dragged back into the canalettos. With the wooden boards, we closed off a narrow portion of the canal, and there we began pulling his large body out of the water. (It was unfortunate that, from behind green shutters, innocent women had to witness the dreadful event that was about to occur.) As we began pulling him up, he started falling apart. Like cookie dough, the top half of his torso separated from the bottom. That’s what years of water will do to you, my boys! In the end, all we had was just the head, arms, chest, and lungs of the beast. We laid him on his back, and he looked at us with a blank stare that reflected the moon. I’ll never forget the void of his eyes. He died breathing like a tuna fish.

“Don’t throw it back in,’ I warned all the men, who nodded in approval. Let me tell you, you waste of youth, it wasn’t like the movies you see in La Bolsa—it was real, it was sad, and it was frightening. Till this day I wish that I had never looked into those mindless eyes.” At that moment Catface revealed an orb-like structure hidden in his vest.

“It’s the eyeball of the Translusor!” yelled Eledro who dropped his notepad and covered his face. Grono jumped back and bumped his head on a bag of flour, which now covered all of the Bohemians. Catface, with a smirk, kept gulping down the bottle.

The Young Bohemians stood in silence after hearing about the infamous Translusor, who, as Catface reminded them, “would kill indiscriminately without reflection, because he *needed to*.” That he *needed to* was the part that scared everybody.

From the back door of El Pinguino, the cobblestones of Avenida Santa Fe could be seen challenging the darkness of the summer night. Off in the distance, keeping better time than a metronome, the steps of a young woman could be heard approaching the restaurant.

“Are you ready to go home, glorious Caesar?” asked a young lady, playfully sticking her head through the doorway. Her wine-colored hair hung from the left side of her tilted head, exposing a pearl earring.

She was the most gorgeous woman the Bohemians had ever seen.

“In nine to eleven . . . maybe ten minutes, my preciousness,” whispered Catface before blowing a kiss through the cloud of flour. (Which actually caused for Eledro’s head to become even whiter.) It was obvious that she was the type of woman who did not even dare to enter such a place. After all, there was flour, dirt, crates of food, garbage, four teenagers, and who knows what else at the back of El Pinguino.

“Well don’t keep me waiting too long, my angel,” she said to the waiter, tapping his nose. Everyone watched in amazement as she walked away.

“How did *you* get a woman like that?” Puchito asked Catface Laguna.

Catface stood up, drank the remainder of his Averna, put the empty bottle on the crate and said, “You have to be the biggest bullshit artist in the country to get a woman like that.” As he turned to walk away, an onion dropped from his vest pocket.

“*Sanatero hijo de puta* [lying son of a bitch]!” shouted Puchito, who at that instant began throwing onions at the fleeing Catface. The rest of the Bohemians immediately joined the cause, unloading over sixty vegetables at the pudgy target. Strangely enough, it appeared that the tipsy old Catface enjoyed dodging the onions, zigzagging from left to right in the middle of Santa Fe, laughing like a hyena. “Thanks for the drink, suckers,” he shouted before disappearing into an alley.

“Should we tell him that we are going to burn down his damn restaurant?” Grono asked Kohl, but it was too late.

The Bohemians walked home that night with flour on their faces. “We don’t deserve to call ourselves Bohemians,” mumbled a humiliated Puchito.

“Well, at least we know what I always suspected,” said Kohl, “as the Professor says, ‘The laws of physics and Andrew Jackson offer a complete account of the world’s phenomena.’”

“Right,” added Grono. Eledro crumbled the five new pages of his notebook and threw them into a field of tall grass.

The next morning all the residents of Mendoza attended what was supposed to be a formal meeting between the Grapepicker’s Union, known as the GU, and some diplomat from Buenos Aires named Balbini. Members of the of the vineyard’s union, pronounced as the “goo,” were fed up with the country’s capital hogging up all the tax money, and they were going to let this Balbini have it. But things did not turn out that way at all.

Balbini managed to turn the formal meeting into a pleasant picnic of sorts. As always, the old ladies brought food, which were displayed with pride, and all the attendees ate and drank like kings. After six dishes and thirty bottles of malbec, the GU seemed to have lost their hunger for war.

Balbini took the podium.

“Before I begin,” he said, “I would like to thank Donia Aurelia for the corn empanadas, and Donia Fina for the ham-and-cheese ones. They were all delicious. Let’s all give them a round of applause.”

The provincianos clapped. Grono clapped with a corn empanada in his mouth.

“I would also like to thank everyone here for letting me visit the beautiful province of Mendoza, which has always looked to the future while maintaining a sense of tradition, and thank Donia Julia for the cannelloni, and Señor Roberto for the *parillada* [barbecue]. The wine was generously donated by the *Trucha* vineyards. Let’s all give them a round of applause.

The provincianos, looking at each other, had to clap again.

“I would also like to thank Donia Amilia for the chicken, and Donia Puprina for . . .”

“When are we gonna talk about business?” interrupted Guido Baruga, the leader of the workers. “Buenos Aires is taking all our money, and we don’t see the results. The streets have potholes, and sometimes the electricity cuts off when I’m listening to futbol on the radio!”

“That’s right,” cheered all the workers, “we should talk about these problems. Let’s stop talking about empanadas!”

Balbini slammed his fat hand on the podium and declared, “I agree with you all one-hundred percent: we

should always reflect on the things that demand reflection, not just empanadas, though they taste good. But things are the way they are because they have to be that way, and the future will be what it will be. Of course there are situations, and we have to really think about them, and rethink them, over and over, till the situation is what it was meant to be. At the capital, we are in the thick of things, looking at the wide issues that are thick and fat. And sometimes they stretch and get wider, and then they stretch in different dimensions. As all things, of course, it is all about energy, the life force.”

The provincianos, who did not have a clue about what the man was saying, looked at each other with puppy eyes, but old Catface was watching Balbini carefully.

“That pothole in your street,” continued the politician, “is there because it is part of our country, part of your family—your blood is in that pothole. You should go up to the pothole and touch it, and feel the gravel on your fingertips. Graze it with your hands, for this is who you are, this is your Argentina. Go on now, Señor Baruga, touch it for all of us.”

Guido Baruga walked to the nearest pothole which was a huge one of three feet in diameter. He knelt down and, with his bare hands, started rubbing the gravel.

“May I ask you, Señor Baruga,” continued Balbini, “what team do you root for during those games on the radio?” Baruga, with his hands in the dirt, looked up at the politician.

“Independiente—and no one make a comment or a face at that,” replied Guido, eyeing everybody. (He had heard that at least some of the workers were fans of Argentino Juniors.)

“Well, well, well, just as I thought, we are brothers after all, for I am a red-devil, too, and let me tell you, I think that that match against Boca last Sunday was rigged. How could Independiente lose like that and be belittled by a bunch of crooks. Brother of mine, I promise you that when I go back to Buenos Aires, the first thing I will do is speak to Señor Arturo Armandolo, President of the AFA [Argentine Futbol Association], and ask him to reconsider whether our fine nation should allow treacherous referees to walk the sacred ground of our futbol fields.”

Señor Guido Baruga, the leader of the GU, dropped the gravel, walked up to the podium and hugged Balbini. Balbini looked at everyone and shouted, “Wine and justice for everyone!” Then, swinging his arms back and forth, he began singing the national

anthem. Everyone jumped up and joined in, except old Catface who was crying alone at a picnic table.

“What’s the matter, Catface? Were you expecting a tarantella?” asked Puchito.

“No, Puchito, it’s just that I never experienced the threat of losing my wife.”

## The Black Eagle

They called him the “Black Eagle” only because he was the most feared drunkard in a town where drinking was considered to be just a way of warming up the skin. In a wine-making province like Mendoza, it was natural for there to be formidable army of borrachos [winos]—they were either the spoiled sons of vineyard owners or your run-of-the-mill “weak hearted” grocer. But the Black Eagle was a different breed. His rage came not from the sun warmed grapes of our Andes, but from the dark alleys of Buenos Aires—the big city. A creature of Saturday nights, he’d pick and finish fights as he went from bar to cabaret, from cabaret to bar, always ending the nocturnal cycle by slipping his white blade into the gut of some poor sailor. At the end of it all, he’d look up at the moon and say, “Now I have also done *this*.” No doubt that when he drank he felt more powerful than the universe itself: you could see it in his bloodshot eyes. Maybe he was this way because a woman once betrayed him, or because he never received a mother’s love, but all these reasons didn’t really matter the moment he would decide to flip the mighty street of Corrientes on its back. A lonely vulture during the day, at night his head would straighten up, his lips would snarl, and his eyes would tighten like those of an eagle looking for some rat to get rid of. And that’s what the provincianos were to him: rats. He particularly enjoyed taking down heroes, though he didn’t mind ridding the world of cowards.

With his head hanging from his shoulders, looking deep into the darkness of a brass-ringed drain, the Black Eagle clenched the brass hot-water key of the Galaxia’s men’s room and asked out loud, “God, what have I become? Save me from my ways—or is it that God and Satan no longer fight for my soul?” He made sure not to look at the three cigarette butts that circled the black hole, nor at the once maple walls, nor did he pay any attention to the three impatient men who kept cursing and knocking at the door. He just kept looking into the only abyss he could find, however small it was, for he believed that God could only be found in places like this. But the outside world pursued with its knocking, and the Black Eagle had no choice but to raise his heavy head, causing hot soapy water to drip from his numbed face to his black shirt. Had the three men outside known that it was he, the Black Eagle, who was inside, they would have changed their minds and gone to the bathroom elsewhere.

But the outside world vanished as soon as he kicked open the door and shattered his empty whiskey glass upon the black-and-white tiles of the Galaxia floor. Not

one of the couples sitting near the miniature palm trees, the gilded bar, or the empty stage (ready with a stool and bandoneon) uttered a single sound. Standing erect and wiping his forehead with his shirtsleeve, the Eagle didn’t look at anyone before doing what he always did at times like this: take to the streets like a freed bird of prey. Of course the patrons of the Galaxia shook their heads and courageously said things like, “What a horrible soul!” *after* the Eagle flew off, but they never dared say it to his face, and that was all that really mattered, for him, and for everyone else. Even Don Fanuci, the owner of the Galaxia, didn’t say a thing when the Eagle once shattered a bottle of whiskey on the perfectly combed head of his new bar tender, who had unfortunately forgotten—or perhaps even worse, refused—to take his boss’s advice of always giving the Eagle whatever he wanted, “so that everything will be at peace.”

Don Fanuci, the social genius of our town and a sinner himself, had the theory that, if everyone got just what they needed, there would be no wars or heartaches in the world. “We say that the hare is peaceful when he tears the grass blades with his teeth but that the cheetah is aggressive because she has to chase and stop her food with her jaws and claws. But the cheetah is doing just what the hare does—she just requires a bigger show. And us men—when we are hungry we steal, and when we go bashing people in the head, like the Black Eagle, it’s because we weren’t fed that thing we call amor [love]. No man full of love wants to burn down the world: it’s all very simple,” Fanuci said while sticking gauze on the forehead of his new employee.

Through the moonlit streets the Black Eagle’s shoes clapped upon the cobblestones like death bells. It wasn’t that Mendoza was a ghost town—as the Eagle liked to believe, but that people were smart enough to hide from him as soon as they heard the clacks of his slumped walk. They stared at the borracho from behind dark windows, through curtains, or, as the pibes [boys] learned to do, from the tops of tall trees. On that particular night there were no sailors in town, and none of the locals had something to prove, so it appeared that the Black Eagle had only himself to torment.

He made three left turns and ended up at the towering gates of the *Mosuleo Chacarita*, the most feared cemetery in the New World. Even the most nihilistic, depressed Argentine was thankful to be alive after visiting the black-marbled Chacarita. No one dared utter the name of the place, and whenever someone did—usually a foreigner or some schoolboy

making the cruel joke “Your grandma smells of Chacarita,” all around would becross themselves in an attempt to cleanse their souls of whatever the dreadful word was capable of conjuring up. Sensible people always asked, “Why does the Chacarita have to be so scary—is it necessary to have demons, black curtains, tall gargoyles, and undertakers who look like *they* themselves had died many times before?” Professor Rivarolla once answered these questions by noting that all cultures attempt to protect the dead from evil in one way or another. The Chacarita was built to scare evil away. But he also added that perhaps the hideousness of the place was a way of keeping Argentines from eating too much beef.

With a dazed mind the Black Eagle slumped through the labyrinthine passages formed by the spaces between the tombs. After bumping his head on the elbow of fifteen-foot statue of Michael the Archangel, he tumbled fifteen steps into a small tomb that was lit by the stump of one candle. Atop the single coffin was a statue of a reclining girl looking to the black drapes that covered the tomb’s entrance, as if she were eagerly awaiting visitors. An unseen draft moved the curtains around her bed. “Morbid Spaniards!” muttered the Eagle, who then turned around and bumped into a full-sized statue of a winged demon with no eyes. Inscribed on his chest read:

SO THAT SHE WILL BE PROTECTED FROM ALL  
WITHOUT EYES HE CANNOT TELL FRIEND  
FROM FOE.

“Don’t trust anyone, I guess,” said the Eagle before lazily crawling out of the dark tomb.

Though the clouds now concealed the moonlight, the candles from within the tombs cast their light on the faces of all the demons that lived in the Chacarita. Some of the demons had their wings spread as if preparing for flight; others were hidden in small crevices, protecting against a cowardly evil that could slither in. “Are there demons for an evil drunkard like me?” asked the Eagle moments before slipping on his side. (The grass of the Chacarita was always moist, “from the tears of all visitors,” people used to say.) “Damn!” cursed the Eagle aloud. He then slipped again after passing two demons. “Bloody hell!” he uttered. More and more the Eagle fell, and each time, he had to lift himself up by clinging to the arms and wings of the hideous statues. But he soon realized that these statues were anything but helpful, and anything but cordial. Looking back at their expressions, he noticed that, in truth, two demons had tripped him. And on another occasion, when he tried to lift himself by grabbing the hand of a particularly fat one, he felt the hand let go,

causing him to land on his back. More eerie was the realization that, no matter where he went, all the mischievous demons had their heads trained upon him.

“Unlike your friend in the tomb, you *can* tell friend from foe. So what am I?” the Black Eagle asked the demons.

“We’re not here for you,” replied a short demon statue that was sitting on the steps of a large tomb, smoking a cigarette. “And be careful of that blind one, he hates everybody.”

“What is it with you statues? Why don’t you all go back to hell and let me be?!” mumbled the drunk Eagle.

“We are not demons but angels disguised as demons. The real demons will show up in an hour to try to win some souls for hell. My name is Gabbi, and I am surprised that, as the undead, you can see and hear us at all.”

“I’ve been drinking too much—maybe I’m half dead already,” replied the Eagle, wiping his brow.

“Well, we could still use you,” commented Gabbi, “I play center field, and Michael over there, the statue who pushed you into that tomb, is our star forward. Our goalie hurt his leg last Sunday, so you could take his place. Have you ever played before? All you gotta do is catch the ball and don’t let the Devils kick it into our a goal.

“Let me explain,” added Gabbi, “there are many souls that are sitting on the fence, as it were, neither in hell nor heaven, but in limbo. (More than you would like in Argentina!) We used to flip a coin to decide whether the souls went to heaven or hell, but now both sides—the angels and devils—have become such big futbol fans in this country that this way it’s more exciting for everybody. We put up quite a fight for those souls—no hands and no wings.”

Before he had a chance to think about how crazy all of this was the Eagle found himself practicing blocks for a soccer match. At first, it was hard to block the shots, for the demons would act as if they were going to kick with the right leg and then they would kick with the left, but after twenty shots or so the Eagle, drunk and all, was quite good, and, more important, he instilled confidence in the team.

Three hours before dawn eleven devils emerged from the ground wearing red tee shirts with the devil’s number printed on them. Unclean and with long hairs, they smelled bad and made horrible noises. Gabbi threw the Black Eagle one of their own jerseys, which, having the colors of heaven, happened to look just like the shirt of the Argentine Selection. Wearing the light-blue stripes of the country’s flag brought a tear to the

Black Eagle's eye. "Outcast or not, I am still an Argentine," he said to himself.

"We're not allowed to draw crosses on the shirts or put them anywhere on the field," said Gabbi, "as you've heard, it makes the devils crazy. Oh, and as for that devil's number, well, we don't know what the hell it means and neither do they."

The Eagle recognized the blind demon from the girl's tomb. He was walking around in the center of the field, continuously blowing his whistle and pointing at people. Manzo, as he was called, always served as referee. "What an excellent referee," thought the Eagle, "he can't tell friend from foe."

The game started, and the Devils passed the ball amongst themselves in an attempt to kill time and dominate the field. They planned to cool down the Angels, who they knew had spent a lot of time warming up doing drills. "You angels live here, but we have to travel all the way from hell!" complained Serini, a former lawyer who was brought to the afterlife by a deranged serial killer named Fulco, the most famous murderer of San Luis.

"Sometimes you know who is going to win just by the way they step on the grass," Gabbi's whispered to the Eagle. The drunkard did not respond, for his eyes were tagged to the ball which kept circulating around the Devils.

"Remember," said Gabbi to Michael the Archangel, "the opportunities we miss in the offense, we will mourn for in the defense."

"Just send me the winning pass," replied the tall angel.

Then the star forward of the Devils, a stocky ruffian by the name of Chumo, tried to accomplish the "goal at first five-minutes," which can demoralize any team. He got through two defenders and kicked a weak shot at the goal. The Eagle scooped up the ball and rolled it back to Michael. Acknowledging the Eagle's swiftness, the Angels smiled at each other. Michael passed it to an angel called "Slave"—because he worked to the death and never needed accolades, but he was immediately fouled by dirty-mouthed Putinio, the most crooked player the Eternal League had ever seen. Whenever Putinio would kick somebody in the shin, or poke someone with his horns, he would fall to the ground screaming and yelling as if *he* had been fouled. Gabbi got the ball and passed it to Michael, who passed it back to Gabbi who then made an incredibly precise pass to Burrongona who was completely wide open and could shoot. But Putinio scratched Burrongona's right cheek with his wing. Blind Manzo blew the whistle and Putinio threw his hands up in the air. "I ain't do

nothing you meticulous blind piece-of-crap!" shouted Putinio to the intolerant Manzo, who had no choice but to issue the devil a yellow card. Although they made a big fuss about it, the Devils certainly preferred a yellow card to a goal from mighty Burrongona. After all, unlike the Angels, they were not looking for a clean reputation. They just wanted souls for hell.

The game resumed and Chumo, after receiving a fast—and perhaps illegal—pass from Putinio, made a deadly goal that no one, not even the members of his own team, had anticipated. Dumbfounded, the Black Eagle saw the ball fill the net of his arch—the one he was entrusted by no one less than heaven to protect. For the first time in his life he felt the anguish of losing to an evil foe. In response to their success, the Devils shrieked, laughed, and scratched each other with claws and wings. Demon blood was everywhere. Proud Chumo ran around the field tugging at his red jersey, displaying the three infamous numbers.

"It's okay," responded a cool Gabbi, running to the other end of the field, but Michael was beginning to lose hope and began to think that having the Eagle as goalkeeper was going to cost them the game. Even worse, if the Angels lost because of the Eagle, the decision to include him in the game would become a major issue of deliberation in the next few weeks, and dead futbol analysts from heaven or hell would have to be called in to offer insights. The best analysts usually came from hell because they would not let anyone get away with anything. "After all," they thought, "no one ever forgave us."

But it had to be the Slave who brought hope to the flagging Angels (and to the soul of some sinner) by making an airborne pass to Burrongona, who lightly tapped the ball with his head right between the legs of Dranka, the famous goalie of the Devils. "Damn!" cursed the mammoth goalkeeper. Manzo blew the half-time whistle, and the Eagle welcomed it with a sigh.

Gabbi, the captain of the Angels, stood in the center of his team and delivered a wake-up call. "When you are out there, wearing the colors of heaven, you shouldn't be thinking about whether our goalkeeper is good or bad, or whether or not Putinio got away with an illegal pass," he said staring at Michael. "For heaven's sake, your asses better be thinking about getting that ball into their goal. Do you know why those devils are focused and we are not? Because they are really pissed off. They are damned for eternity, and this is the only thing they've got! We angels, on the other hand, got it too good, and now we are losing the edge that allowed us to kick the Devil out of heaven in the first place. We forget about the sinners. Let me remind you: one bad

pass may send a soul to hell! We need more indians and less chiefs, and we definitely don't need any pretty boys who sit around waiting for the winning pass."

Unfortunately, the second half of the match was uneventful, for both teams were exhausted. What the Black Eagle had always feared since the 1929 World Cup was about to take place, but this time, he was more than an observer.

"Definition by penalty kicks," proclaimed Manzo, and all of the tired players dropped to the grass.

Gabbi consulted him privately. "Alright, just relax," he said in whispers. "Look, you have a lot of aggression in your game, which is good. Just focus that energy on the ball. You know, the best of five kicks wins the match."

That, and a tap on the shoulder, was all that Gabbi and the forces of heaven could do for the Eagle.

Putinio ran by and yelled, "*Don't let the ball in the goal* is what Gabbi is trying to tell you, you hellhound drunkard."

"You know," said Gabbi to the Eagle, "Putinio was a jerk before the boss sent him to hell."

The whistle blew, and Burrongona made the first kick against Dranka. It went straight in. In shame, Dranka covered his face with his wings and punched the top beam of his arch with both hands.

Then Chumo got one through the legs of the Black Eagle, who froze and watched the ball pass right beside him.

With confidence Gabbi got it in, three inches of the left corner of Dranka's pole. "Penalty kicks are not just luck," he reminded everyone.

Of course Putinio got it in, and he let the whole world know about it by taking off his shirt and emitting fire from his mouth. He flew above the Eagle and shouted, "I'll watch you burn in hell!"

Showing no confidence, Michael the Archangel walked up to the ball and shot it directly into Dranka's hands. The Angels shook their heads, and the star forward knelt down and began crying like a child. The next Devil to kick was Jassanas, a former insurance salesman who had a powerful kick. To the surprise of all, the Eagle leaped to the right corner of his arch and pushed the ball out with his fingertips. All the Angels rejoiced and lifted their goalie in the air. "I could do this, we could win," said the Eagle to his new friends.

Now an Angel *had* to score, and so they called on the Slave, who, without an ounce of pride, faked Dranka and made a quiet goal to the right corner. Dranka jumped and ate the dirt of the left corner.

Now it was all down to the Eagle. The whistle was blown. He jumped into the air. In the midst of flight,

the image of the Galaxia's bathroom drain suddenly came back into his mind. He saw the brass ring with the spiraling water as if it were right before him. Then he remembered his youth in Buenos Aires—the bars, the alleys, the streets, the port. "Why am I thinking of such things now?" he thought. One second later, he felt cold grass on the right side of his face and saw a soccer ball bouncing away from him, tapping the grass of the Chacarita three times.

"He blocked it, he blocked it!" yelled Gabbi, "we won!"

All the Angels lifted their hero in the air and flew him around the Chacarita like a true Olympian. The Devils, spitting, cursing, and fighting with each other, dove back to hell, except Dranka who was classy enough to exchange shirts with the Eagle.

"Thanks for filling in," said Gabbi, "it was an incredible performance. I don't know how you blocked that last bullet. Too bad you can only play with us if you're dead, which you say you are not."

"Right, I must be half-dead or something" responded the Eagle, trying to make sense of his status as futbol player.

The Slave passed by, dribbling the ball with his legs. "Was he one of the souls on the fence?" he asked the captain.

"I really don't know," replied a breathless Gabbi, "we get the paper work in weeks down here. You now how it is in the southern cone—the bureaucracy can kill you, but the futbol is good."

"Hey, goalie, would you like to enter heaven now? You've more than earned it, and we could sneak you in early, if you like. Hey, that means you could play next Sunday," added Michael the Archangel.

The Angels waited for the Black Eagle's answer.

"No, not yet, but thank you," said the drunkard, "I have yet to earn heaven in other ways."

The Black Eagle hugged all of his team members and exited the Chacarita, closing the black gates behind him. He walked through the streets of Mendoza as if a great lead weight had been lifted from his soul. But the Eternal League was not the only strange encounter he had that night.

"Señor, would you help me find the street General Paz? I'm lost, and no one is around," spoke a young, buxom Italian woman with folds of blond hair held back by a single pin. She grabbed his wrist and said, "You strike me as a very good man."

"General Paz?" he said, looking in all directions as people do when lost, "keep going down this street." He then dropped the arm that was pointing west and continued walking away from her.



“Would you please walk with me? A young lady like me is scared to walk alone at night.”

“What?!” he said, turning around, “all that could harm you in this town is dead or walking away from you right now—so please leave me alone. I am not the kind gentleman you think I am.”

“It is so kind for you to offer to take me to General Paz and tell me about yourself, about your whole life. My name is Lucetta,” she said, playfully giving him a light kiss on the cheek and holding his arm like a bride.

The Black Eagle walked with her for several blocks, not understanding what was going on. He had a strange night and didn’t know how to deal with this sort of thing. Lucetta began talking about her cat and how it *really* loves her, even though all her friends told her that cats don’t love their masters but sleep near them only for warmth.

“I don’t need to go to General Paz anymore. I changed my mind. Would you walk me back to my father’s vineyard? It’s a little out of town, and I’m scared of the mountain lions,” she said with a voice that could not take “no” for an answer.

She turned him around and kept talking about cats, grapes, and a million other things that the Black Eagle never cared about. He kept thinking about the shot he blocked, and what a strange night it was. When they reached her father’s vineyard, she insisted that they rest under the moonlight and live off the grapes, which they ended up doing for a whole day.

“But I am an evil man!” said the Black Eagle as soon as Lucetta ran her short fingers through his black hair.

“You may have *been* evil, but you are not evil *now*. Grammar teachers always say that the word ‘am’ and ‘are’ can only be used for the present. Hence, you *are* not evil.”

And this is how Lucetta and the Black Eagle fell in love. He soon cleaned up his act, married her, and spent the remainder of his life being quite a productive grape picker and goalie of the local team, *Los Phantoms*. The people of Mendoza grew to forgive and admire the once feared Black Eagle, who never understood why fate had forgiven him, nor how he blocked that second penalty kick. But the owner of the Galaxia, years later, had some theories.

“Maybe God finally heard what the borracho kept saying to my sink,” said Don Fanuci, looking over his eyeglasses to his three regular drunkards. Fanuci kept washing just the rims, never the bottoms, of his whiskey glasses. “Or maybe God finally made up for all those years of starvation that the poor kid must have endured—’cause people don’t become evil for no

reason, you know,” continued Fanuci, rattling his head from side to side, “or maybe on that strange night years ago, some drunk witch in Granada made a curse that went awry, causing little Lucetta to fall in love with the Black Eagle. Who knows, maybe the Black Eagle did something good for somebody.

“Or perhaps worse of all,” reconsidered the bartender, now looking through the bottom of a dirty glass, “perhaps important things like this—things that can make a man evil or good—are just left to chance.” At that moment, Don Fanuci accidentally dropped his whiskey glass on the black-and-white tiles of the Galaxia floor.

## Message for Pamela

Torino found the old war helmet in an abandoned shed near the cordillera. Whenever he wore it while playing cops-and-robbers, Cousin Alejandro would snatch it off his head and give him a lecture about how such things should be treated with respect. “These physical objects are the closest things to the experiences themselves,” Alejandro would say while pointing at the name inscribed inside the helmet, “do you have any idea what this thing has been through in the life of this poor . . . this Private Grant? We’re talking about war, about glory and hell!” But Torino never took his cousin seriously, for Alejandro was notoriously apprehensive of all things. He was the party pooper when the boys would throw mud balls at the businessmen, or when they would scare Aunt Josefa by rattling her bed in the middle of the night, simulating an Andean tremor. After roughhousing in the Plaza one afternoon, Torino fell into a hypnotic sleep as he was trying to balance himself on his favorite seesaw. The large helmet, flopping to one side of his small head, managed to stay on him, shielding him from the sunlight and bringing him the strangest dream of his life.

“I’m running through a field carrying a heavy rifle,” he later recounted to his friend Sebastian. “Then I hear a blast, and the next thing I know, I’m down on the ground, speaking to myself, saying the weirdest thing, over and over.

*Pamela, I’m happy that you met a good man like Miguel.*

*Be a good wife to him. I will love you till the death. Farewell.*

“I have the same nightmare every time I sleep with the helmet on.”

“Then don’t sleep with it on. Is she in our class?” asked Sebastian.

“No, you see, I’ve figured out that this dream isn’t about me: I am actually dreaming the final minutes of the original owner of the helmet, Private Grant himself.”

“What?! Go tell that fairy tale to a Gallego.”

“Sebastian, I really don’t care what you think—I just want you to help me find out more about this poor soldier. This time it’s for real.”

Sebastian lifted his head. “So you want to find out more?” he asked, “well, in this miserable town there is only one way to find out more—and it’s not by going to some library or bureaucratic Argentine hell-hole; it’s by asking those hags you see sitting around doing nothing. You want to learn more about this Private Grant? Ask them, they know everything—and the more innocent and

quiet they look, the more they know. Don’t let them fool you.”

Torino took Sebastian’s advice and learned many things about Private Grant.

“The German was living here in Mendoza and fell in love with a local Italian girl,” he told his friend.

“Who could blame ‘em?!” mumbled Sebastian, who at that moment was playing with a large rubber band that belonged to an abandoned motor.

“Well, things were great, but then the Great War broke out, and he went back to fight for Germany.”

“What a boludo [idiot]! We Argentines know better—no war for us!”

“Yea, but that’s not the worst of it. After many years, she got tired of waiting for him, and so she met some guy that lived on her quadra [city block].”

“*Always* the pelotudo [jerk] on the quadra!” said Sebastian as his rubber band snapped into the air. Torino and Sebastian flinched but immediately regained their composure.

“Yea, but she said that she wouldn’t marry him till Grant gave her the okay, so she wrote Grant a letter.”

“And then what?”

“Grant was so bitter that he never replied, letting up only when the grim reaper was around the corner, ‘only then finding it in his heart to do the noble thing,’ as Alejandro told me.”

“The hell with Alejandro. Did she get married?”

“Yea, but I guess it was a guilty type of marriage, ‘cause, you see, she never found out that Grant gave her the okay.”

“Too bad he didn’t do it with pen and paper instead of saying it to the air. That miserable woman is probably still in our province, alone and full of guilt. We should find out what she’s up to, but not right now,” said Sebastian who finally managed to get his rubber band around a bicycle wheel.

So Torino and Sebastian, after interrogating some of the local señoras, discovered that Pamela Sabatini, wife of Dr. Miguel Sabatini and mother of three, actually lived nearby. They decided to visit her home on that coming Sunday, which they did exactly as planned except for Sebastian’s last minute refusal to enter the home.

The Sabatini’s, being the good provincianos that they were, carried out the tradition of spoiling to death anyone below the age of twenty-four. (In the provinces, being a boy was enough of a reason to be celebrated.) Pamela Sabatini immediately brought out pastries and tea. “The poor boys are lost,” she thought. Though Torino was too young to recognize it, Pamela was a very attractive

woman, with long hair and intelligent eyes. Torino sat down and decided to deliver his message only after finishing his food and tea. “He is the cutest peli-rojo [redhead]!” said Mrs. Sabatini as Torino ate pastry after pastry with his army helmet still on.

“Where did you find this rare helmet?” asked Dr. Sabatini while inspecting it with his fingers.

At that point Torino gulped down the last crescent of a chocolate alfajor [type of pastry], took off his heavy helmet, and said, “Señora Sabatini, I have a message from Private Grant, a message that he wanted to give you moments before his death. He wanted you to know this, and I, out of respect for such things, things which are closest to the experiments themselves, have memorized it word for word:

*Pamela, I'm happy that you met a good man like Miguel.*

*Be a good wife to him. I will love you till the death. Farewell.*

At this, Mrs. Sabatini broke down in tears, hugging and kissing young Torino, who remained unmoved like any child his age. Her husband, not understanding what was going on, attempted to console her. “I’m fine,” she said, “only in heaven did I think I would get an answer.”

Torino met Sebastian outside and handed him a napkin full of pastries. Together they walked to the plaza, which would normally be gloomier on a Sunday like this one. After roughhousing for several hours, Torino again fell asleep on his favorite seesaw with his helmet on, but this time, he dreamt of nothing.

## The World of Andrew Jackson

“These facts are not to be disclosed to those in that stage of life where all things seem to be understood,” scribbled the Professor in his journal, “after 342 experiments, the *Method and the Transcription* has failed, and things will undoubtedly fall apart. May God bring an answer into this old mind!” Egio Elfemore Rivarolla, touted as the wisest tano [Italian] in the provinces of Mendoza, San Luis, and San Juan, closed his book and, for the first time in ten years, abandoned his back table at the Café Astoria after the sun had descended upon the Andes, carrying out with him a globe of the world, three Egyptian statuettes, and several “books of the week” nestled under his arms.

“Professori, why the hurry? Your living in the *interior* now, in the Land of the Sun and Good Wine,” said Don Pellegrino, who was reluctantly returning four toasted ham-and-cheese sandwiches back to the kitchen. (The Young Bohemians, sitting outside, claimed that they were burnt.)

Professor Rivarolla remembered his days as a student at the University of Cordoba, and his experiences abroad. He was a worldly man, but he was also proud of being a laid-back provinciano. Normally, his bald head and bald globe could be seen bobbing up-and-down through the quiet streets of Mendoza with that softened joy gained from a life of routine. But today was not one of those days.

“No hurry at all, for place does not really matter. It is just that I have failed to find the solution and it’s already the third of August 1945 . . .”

“Right,” retorted an indifferent Pellegrino, who was too busy keeping the Bohemians at bay.

“But make sure the cheese is melted!” someone yelled from the front of the café.

“Of course!” the Professor concluded aloud, dropping his globe of the world on the wooden floor of the Astoria. “How could I have forgotten the Young Bohemians and the infamous Puchito Bonano?!” With all of his articles he ran to the outside table of the Astoria, right into Bohemian territory.

And there they were, as always—Crazy Kohl, Puchito, Eledro, and Fat Grono, dressed in black and waiting for perfect sandwiches.

“Bet you wish you were as smart as those armpits,” said Puchito to the Professor. Puchito learned at an early age that no generic insult is as good as one that is custom made.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the Young Bohemians, the future of our fine country, the hope of a grateful nation

whose exorbitant fat can sustain such *buena vida*, killing endless hours at the Astoria, in spite of a world in misery, a world at war,” said the Professor, lighting a cigarette, “but don’t worry, the day will come when Argentines will have to work for eight hours in order to enjoy just two. You young men should learn that a little strife and service to the world is what builds man’s character.” He absentmindedly threw the dead match on their table. Puchito looked down at it.

“You know,” continued the Professor, “there’s more to life than watching the vines grow in the houses that your grandfathers struggled to buy. Doesn’t anyone dream about saving the world anymore?! By the way, did I hear the obnoxious treble of Puchito’s metallic voice insinuating that I don’t read my tomes, that I carry them around just for show?”

“Now who else could produce such an insult?!” said Puchito, whose face was redder than the falling sun, “I’m just saying that it’s impossible for anyone to read any ‘tome’ in the back of the café where all you can hear is Don Pellegrino’s bitching at the help and the ding of dishes. But then again, that may be *your* strife, *your* great service to the world!”

Fat Grono’s deep laugh seemed to cause the metal table to vibrate as a cool wind whistled through the aluminum, wood, and canvas that together formed the skeleton of the Astoria, filling the maroon-and-black canopy from underneath and rattling the copper poles that barely held it up. The wind carried leaves, scraps of paper, and the voices of children playing at the nearby Plaza Independencia, pibes [boys] who were already complaining to their mothers that it was too early to go home. It was one of those gloomy South American Sundays.

The Professor looked to the plaza and took a deep breath. “It’s time you young men learn something important about this world, about this life . . . about . . . Calcutta. Stop by my home when you finish your sandwiches, only if you don’t have anything better to do, of course.”

“Don’t let the pucho [cigarette] burn your beard. You couldn’t be a Professor without it,” shouted Puchito. Rivarolla walked off and laughed to himself, “As if Bohemians have something better to do!”

They arrived two hours late at the Professor’s house, but he was such a gentleman that he pretended not to notice. He was one of the few who understood and respected Bohemian philosophy.

The home was an extension of his body and spirit: not one vertical or horizontal space was devoid of a book, map, or ancient figurine. Even the floor was covered, by Montessor, the Professor's lazy St. Bernard. Montessor was so motionless that he always seemed to be between life and death, like his namesake in Poe. Nevertheless, he would follow the young guests with his tired eyes as if he were somehow still fulfilling his duties as watch dog. Grono walked straight to the table.

And what it table it was. It had a bowl of olives, dried salami, crackers, several cheeses, and four bottles of malbec, the grape of the Mendoza. It was illuminated by a ceiling lamp which had one of those translucent green covers found in billiard halls. The Bohemians felt honored, but Puchito was suspicious, as always.

"Have some salami and wine. Make yourselves at home, for what I will tell you tonight will take some time and patience," said the Professor before gulping down two large cubes of salami.

"Wow, wow, wow!" warned Puchito, "there is no reason to be suicidal: I understand that as an old man the best has already passed, but there is no reason to die vulgarly with a cube of salami in the throat! You don't want the headlines of tomorrow's *Diario de Los Andes* to read *Our Tano Socrates Dead, but It Wasn't Hemlock!*"

"Young Puchito, it's true that the best is in the past. As a matter of fact, my memories are greater than yours could ever be, for as a young man I would never spend a Sunday night with an old man like me," said the Professor with a victorious smile.

"That's because you weren't as giving as I am when it comes to old farts," said Puchito. The Professor laughed and decided to begin his monologue. Montessor was the only one spared from the cloud of smoke hovering above the table.

"When I was completing my dissertation on *The Method and the Transcription*, at Cordoba, I heard the most bizarre rumor about a man who was, well, a man who was in charge of this world, in charge of running this planet."

"Honk, honk, make way," announced Puchito, "here comes the bullcrap!"

"Well, it was said that this man was in charge of the planet's magnetic field, axis, rotation, revolution, oceans, life forms—of all the things you could imagine," continued the Professor, "I know it sounds crazy, and as a scientist, I didn't take such rumors seriously. Till one day, when this very man summoned me for a very important mission." The

Professor then looked to the door. "Right out there knocked a tall Indian by the name of Murdock, an assistant of this important man. Without any words, he handed me a folded letter that read:

MR. ANDREW JACKSON WOULD LIKE TO  
MEET YOU. PLEASE FOLLOW MY ASSISTANT  
MURDOCK. YOU ARE IN VERY, VERY GOOD  
HANDS

"Because I was young and ambitious, I decided to go along with whatever this thing was—just as all young men embark upon perilous voyages. At that point, the silent Murdock blindfolded me, and I entered the deepest sleep I had ever experienced, truly sublime, only to awaken in a small town outside Calcutta, India, in front of a nasty saloon called Lagash—a place of swindlers, beggars, and broken ceiling fans."

"Did Murdock give you an anaesthetic?" asked Kohl as Grono peeled the skin off salami with a spoon.

"Those things are used in our way of life, not theirs. But let me get back to the story, for time is running out. Murdock directed me to the back of the dark saloon where I found the man in charge of our planet, the great Andrew Jackson himself. Wearing a black tuxedo with blood-red lapels, he stood out like a sore thumb, you can imagine. He was a stunningly good-looking man, but his youthful facha could not conceal the tired maturity of someone who had seen it all and had worked long hours without pay—and long hours they were! Next to him stood another of his assistants, an African named Bacon, who remained motionless when Murdock kindly pulled a chair out for me. I could now almost see our small square table with eight scarlet tiles in the center and Jackson's wine glass sitting on the leftmost one, nearest him. From the side of my eye I kept looking up at the expressionless Bacon. 'What's with him?' I thought. Andrew Jackson looked up at him, rolled his eyes, and then solemnly looked down again at his glass of red wine.

'I am Andrew Jackson. I am in charge of this iron planet,' he uttered without showing the slightest bit of pride.

'Like the president?' I asked.

'Who?' he asked, still looking down at his glass.

'Listen very carefully,' he said, looking at me for the first time, 'imagine all that could happen, and the few things that do happen. Instant by instant an indeterminate number of events strives to occur, but very few succeed. Time is very stingy, giving one spot to only one thing, at only one time. The war between *what could be* and *what is* is the greatest

struggle of our universe, a tension called the *Trata* by us the planet workers.

‘Trata?’ I asked, ‘so there are other planet workers?’

‘Yes, I have a brother working Jupiter and a few others in systems that you wouldn’t know about, but that’s irrelevant right now. What *is* important is that the oceans not rise and fall upon the land, that your planet not collide with Mercury, that a man remain a man and not spontaneously turn into a worm, that a meteor not strike the Island of Manhattan, that our planet not rotate in the opposite direction, that a crab not provoke massive earthquakes . . . What do you believe prevents all these things from happening?’

‘Gravity. Inertia. The conservation of energy . . .’ I said before being interrupted by Jackson who clenched my forearm and brought his face closer to mine, so that we were looking at each other eye to eye.

‘When you can explain to me what ‘gravity’ and those other things are, then my assistants and I can retire. All those things you speak about and learned in school will not make sense after today,’ he said. At this, Murdock and Bacon smiled, but Andrew Jackson remained serious and ran his fingers from his pale forehead through his uncut brown hair.

‘Things are the way they are because of what we do and what we have done every day for the last five billion years. Sure, we’ve made some mistakes: the disappearance of those boring reptiles years ago was due to a miscalculation by one of my brothers working in what you call the Andromeda galaxy. It was quite embarrassing: he let an asteroid get away. But, overall, we do a good job.’ Bacon nodded in approval.

‘We will take you to the center of the Earth, where we operate and where you’ll learn about your mission,’ said Jackson, effortlessly standing up from the table. The humidity was so thick that day that the mosquitoes couldn’t fly.

‘At that moment we headed for a makeshift tube well, blasted out about one mile south of Lagash. I looked straight into it and could see nothing but pitch-black and hear only a slowly turning murmur. Murdock nudged me to jump in, and I did, only to free fall for several long hours. As we plummeted to the center of our planet, Bacon stared at me with a face so expressionless that it somehow discouraged me from screaming. ‘Is this why Jackson hired him?’ I asked myself.

‘After some time we landed on a mountain of fine white sand in the middle of a small cavern. Murdock led us to a small wooden door built into large brown stones. The place looked much like the coal mines of

our country. Standing two meters from the door, Andrew Jackson began chanting a secret code, which went something like this.” Assuming the voice of Andrew Jackson, the Professor read from an old handkerchief:

*She turns her left shoulder into the new day  
Planet Earth, with all brethren in orbit  
And though the astronomer has stolen her  
for his grand play,  
I know her, too, in my own way,  
Like the babe in the womb who knows her well  
For he is of, not from, this world.*

*Trata, all that desires cannot be  
Trata, a Planet Runner must come to oversee*

“One second after the last word,” continued the Professor, “the wooden door opened, and I was led into a cavern so large that its walls could not be seen. The space was full of old wooden cranks, levers, pulleys, wheels, and cauldrons. It was a real mess, and the amount of noise produced by the machines was intolerable. Local Bengalis, about fifty of them, were pulling on levers, pushing cranks, filling and emptying thirty-foot high cauldrons of water, turning cogs, and worst of all, incessantly yelling at each other—about as bad as Don Pellegrino with his help. I heard a short stocky one yell at another, ‘Stop slowing the spin, boludo!’ At that point, Andrew Jackson felt obliged to explain some things to me.

‘You see those two men turning those giant cogs? If they don’t wind that gear on a daily basis, the world won’t turn. It’ll just sit still, and there will be no new days. And those levers over there keep the tectonic plates in place, and those pulleys cut the winds . . .’

‘How could that wooden gear turn the earth if it’s not attached to anything at all?’ I couldn’t help but interrupt Mr. Jackson.

‘It’s not what *it* does, but what we *do*. What matters is that we devote the necessary time and attention to these things—that someone cares enough to do them. It’s in the doing, not the making, but these things are difficult to explain to an outsider.

‘Granana,’ he snapped to a worker standing near a small bucket, ‘make sure that that sea’s tide rises. Put some more water into that bucket.’ Andrew Jackson told me that the large cauldrons regulated the depth of the oceans and that the small bucket was for the Mediterranean Sea. As we walked away, I looked back and saw Granana pissing in the bucket of our beloved Mediterranean! I learned at that moment that

our world was not run like a German automobile factory.”

In the midst of the Professor’s story, the howl of Andean wolves could be heard in the distance. The Professor slowly looked over his shoulder towards the mountains. “Was that a warning from the night?” he asked, “I wonder if it’s already too late—you know the campesinos say that beasts can sense the coming of seismic tremors. Right Montessor?” Lazy Montessor ignored his master and dragged his gaze to the cuckoo clock, anticipating its three gongs by two seconds. It was very late, but the Young Bohemians were all so thrilled to finally learn how the world works that time no longer mattered to them. Fat Grono was the only one who seemed bored, twirling a toothpick in his glass of wine.

“We must continue anyway,” declared the Professor before pouring himself another glass of absinthe, “it is our duty to the world.”

“Now we know where he gets his stories,” whispered Puchito to Kohl. The Professor rushed to continue.

“Mr. Jackson took me to an alcove in the quietest section of the large cavern, where a fiery light illuminated his pale face. That’s where he told me about the mission.

“Bacon informed me that you are from the Southern Cone and that you are working on some project, *The Method and the Transcription*. Is that right?” Jackson asked me.

“Yes,” I said. Then, looking to Bacon, Jackson mentioned to me that he knew our continent very well and that a small mistake was made there recently, one involving a man metamorphosing into an octopus. But that’s not what he wanted to see me about.

“Do you know what causes earthquakes?” he asked me, looking away as if my knowing the answer were an impossibility. By that time I had had enough experience not to answer his rhetorical questions.

“They’re not caused by all those things that you scientists believe,” he said, “they’re really caused by a despicable pest called Mingi—a terrible, angry, loathsome creature!”

“Mingi?” I asked. After all, what was I to believe?! Bacon and Murdock brought over a large glass jar which held what looked like a regular crab, but with a large human head. The face was a cross between Cantonese and Mongolian, with long circular moustaches, like those of a good Gallego. I couldn’t believe my eyes! The creature kept staring at me with the rudest expression I had ever witnessed. Bacon quickly opened the jar, and faster than lightning, Mingi

called me a fat fool! Mingi’s angry voice reverberated within the jar until Andrew Jackson gently closed the lid.

“This is what causes earthquakes,” he said to me while dryly pointing at the jar. “If Mingi is not insulted back on a daily basis, earthquakes can occur anywhere on the globe, but if he is insulted, he goes into a sleep that is only as deep as his insult was degrading. Being that we don’t have your social way of life, we’ve been only able to get him into a light sleep that lasts about a day. Theoretically, however, little Mingi could be degraded to the point of flipping on his back and sleeping for millennia. Don’t ask me why—it’s just the way things are.”

“Murdock demonstrated this bizarre relationship between insults and sleep by opening the lid and calling Mingi ‘UGLI.’ That was the only word I ever heard the Indian utter.

“Boy, you’re a real creative dumb ass!” responded Mingi before dozing off into a light sleep.

“Again,” said Jackson, “it’s all in the *intention*, not the *making*.”

“What does this have to do with me? I’m just a scientist!” I asked with my hands up in the air.

“In several decades there will be a big explosion in the Pacific that will affect all the continents of the world. The Andean fault will be the most vulnerable for reasons that you cannot understand. If Mingi causes earthquakes at the time of this explosion, it will have effects that we are not prepared to deal with.”

“Because of a resonance?” I asked, trying to find at least one thing that could perhaps obey the laws of physics.

“No, but for reasons that you couldn’t believe. Please abandon your *Method and the Transcription* nonsense and learn how to insult a crab, if you want to do real science. You can imagine how difficult the time of these future events will be for my small crew: the Trata will be tricky to oversee, and I’m not as on top of things as I used to be. You see, I’ve grown tired of being a planet runner, fed up of this endless obstacle race, dealing with one problem after another. Sometimes I wish I had been assigned to Pluto.”

“Murdock and Bacon handed me the jar, and Andrew Jackson said to me, ‘Do us and your people a favor: by any means necessary, make sure that angry Mingi is asleep when that great explosion goes off. Good luck and farewell, my friend.’ With his red lapels and black tuxedo, the man in charge of our planet picked up a violin and started playing Bach in the middle of the huge cavern while all the Indians continued their painful toil. A fiery glow illuminated

the gears that were turning, and the pulleys that were lifting, but till this day I can't understand most of what I saw. I sat there for three partitas till Murdock blindfolded me and brought me back to quiet Cordoba. Since then I have seen the world through different eyes, you can imagine."

"Now I know why I'm here!" said Puchito, "and I thought the wine and cheese were for free!" Crazy Kohl immediately looked at one of shelves of the bookcase where there was a large cylinder covered by a scarlet tablecloth. "That's Mingi," he thought.

"Yes, that's right Puchito. I am embarrassed to say that, though I have studied science all of my life, I do not have the skills necessary to prevent earthquakes. But *you* do!" saying this, the Professor carefully brought down the large cylinder and unveiled it. There was Mingi himself, with moustaches and all, giving everyone a dirty look. Grono jumped off his chair. He had not kept up with the Professor's story.

"I've been calling him 'ugly thing' every morning for several decades," continued the Professor, "but I'm afraid that my insults don't work very well. They lack a certain panache. Sometimes Mingi just laughs at me and calls me 'pathetic.' Not one of my 342 experiments has succeeded in making him dormant, and he's been growing more and more resistant by the day."

"Why's he so angry, 'cause he's been alone in that jar for billions of years? Can't we make a truce with him, give him a piece of fish or something?" asked Eledro.

"You're always such a wimp!" snapped Puchito.

"How long could he be awake for?" asked Kohl.

"Not too long—he could start tremors in about three hours, and then . . . then things could get worse," said the Professor with a helpless voice.

We all sat there looking at Puchito, who was holding his chin while contemplating his new nemesis. Mingi kept irreverently clicking his claws and spitting out jets of water.

Standing up like a war general, Puchito Bonano said, "Instead of staring at me like a crowd of hags at a soccer match, why don't you go fetch the stuff I'll need?! Grono, go find me a mirror (you'll know when you've come across one 'cause it'll have your face on it); Eledro, go fetch me a blue crab from the river; and Kohl, just stick around because I need at least one person with some brains near me when I try to save this backwards planet." Then, working alone, he cleared the table and boxed-in its edges with four pieces of wood taken from Rivarolla's bookcase. In twenty minutes, all of Puchito's demands were met,

but no one, not even Crazy Kohl, could foresee what he was going to do with all these strange things. "How could a mirror, four pieces of wood, and one blue crab save the world?" everyone thought under the green of the ceiling lamp.

"Disgusting!" declared Eledro while handing the crab over to Puchito, who quietly put it in a metal bucket underneath the table. "It'll rattle around for just a few moments," he assured himself aloud. The only other thing with enough energy to move around was a firefly that jaggedly circled the smoky room and met its fate on our table, which now looked more like the Roman Coliseum than a piece of furniture.

"Stand back and watch silently. The slightest sound could ruin it for the world," warned Puchito. Talking to the empty arena, he kept rehearsing different sequences of insults that all led to the same punch line, something to the effect of "YOU SEE, SHE WOULD RATHER DIE." No one really understood what was going on, but everyone was impressed by Puchito's professionalism. "The weight of any insult depends on the build-up and on how much the victim cares about what's being insulted. You see, you can tell that Grono doesn't care about being fat, 'cause he lets us call him that," said the expert. Grono, not really caring about what was being said, nodded in approval and spread some blue cheese on his thirteenth cracker.

After two hours of preparation, Puchito asked the Professor to set Mingi loose, claiming, "I'm ready to take on a worthy, international opponent." Rivarolla cautiously opened the lid and laid the jar sideways. Everyone jumped back when Mingi popped out and ran around the arena like a chicken without its head. Kohl explained that this behavior was due to his being confined to a jar for billions of years.

"Good to see you, you head of mortadella!" snapped Mingi.

"Oh, and you're the most beautiful crab on earth, you nasty freak of nature," retorted Puchito. They went straight at it.

"What are you talking about, you red-headed moron? I'm a crab, Order *Decapoda*."

"Decapoda my ass! More like Order *Ugly-bottom-feeder-with-a-human-facha-and-Spanish-moustaches!* Decapoda only in your dreams, rat thing!"

"Ugly-as-hell-with-human-facha?" questioned Mingi while setting down his claws on the table, "that's strange—due to my manner, style, and education, I always thought of myself as a very handsome crab, the standard for the rest of the species."



At that point, Puchito threw Grono's mirror before Mingi's face as fast as lightning. Mingi screamed and jumped two feet into the air with claws and legs extended.

"Agh' isn't the half of it! Now you know why you were lucky not to have seen your *standard* ugly self for five billion years!" said Puchito. Eledro came over and gently patted a his fighter's forehead with a moistened towel. Signs of stress and fatigue were already beginning to show.

"So what?" asked Mingi after regaining his presence of mind, "so I'm not your everyday crab. Heck, maybe I'm a superior crab, and maybe that's why I look the way I do."

"Right—you're a regular movie star," said Puchito.

"Yea, maybe I am."

"Yea? Or is it that you are just a disgusting crustacean that a female crab wouldn't touch if it were handed to her on a platter by a mermaid? Maybe you're just that!" screamed Puchito, who should've known better than to raise his metallic voice.

"And *maybe* you came out of a buffalo's rear—by the way, jackass, what's wrong with your voice?" said Mingi. "You sound like a run-down car horn. What were you fed as a child, tin and helium? Ever thought of learning sign language? You should—I would if I were you," he said while eyeballing everyone, seeking approval, "'cause you'd spare us from your horn! Are you flammable, helium-boy? Do parrots follow your cackle around thinking you're their long lost son, or are dogs the only ones that can hear your voice? Don't talk anymore—you're hurting Mingi's ears. Don't talk! Don't talk! Don't talk! Don't talk!" Mingi kept repeating while tightly shutting his eyes and covering his human ears with crab pincers.

Sweat broke on the red freckles above Puchito's eyebrows: he was not prepared to deal with the quick change of subject. At that moment, the ceiling lamp swayed, and a small figurine of Pallas Athena fell head-first to the floor. "Tremor! Tremor!" yelled Eledro. Kohl and Grono tried to stabilize the table, and the Professor held the ceiling lamp. "Mingi's going to win!" shouted a desperate Eledro, "he's on a roll! Throw in the towel, Puchito! The hell with all this—this bug has years of insult experience ahead of you, and your routine isn't working! God save us—the Andes are going down!" But Crazy Kohl quickly signaled with his hands that everyone stay calm. "Let the master work," he said, "he's the best there is, and he's our only hope."

"And from your voice I just can't tell," continued Mingi who *was* on a roll, "are you a boy or a girl, or an aardvark blowing his nose through a kazoo?" The crab kept victoriously clicking his claws as more books and statuettes kept falling to the floor. The Professor tried to rescue some of his cherished artifacts, but it was as useless as running between raindrops. Puchito remained calm and unshaken, scratching the bottom of his chin and thinking, "If Mingi doesn't bring up the subject of looks again, my secret weapon won't work."

"Did a baboon ever sit on your facha?" asked Mingi, "how will you ever reproduce with those red marks on your face, tomato head?"

"Reproduce? Maybe a female crab never saw Mingi's ugly face," Puchito said as casually as possible, trying to hide his most powerful playing card. Mingi scanned the room suspiciously, but it was all in vain, for the secret weapon was hidden under the table.

"Maybe *you're* the ass of a female crab—women happen to love Mingi, because he doesn't have freckles like you," replied Mingi. It was clear to everyone that Mingi's technique was now getting sloppy and careless, "from having had bad practice with Murdock," elucidated Crazy Kohl.

But the tremors still got worse, and Kohl, having finally figured out Puchito's strategy, threw his friend the metal bucket from underneath the table.

"Women love Mingi? Is that right?!" exclaimed Puchito Bonano while stealthily placing the dripping crab in the arena. The wet blue crab ran around frantically, hitting the walls and scratching the floor of the arena like a drunk flamenco dancer. Though Mingi was at first thunderstruck to see what he believed to be his *soul mate*, he nonetheless approached *her* with open arms and a big smile, trying to make a good first impression. He then tried to hug her with his claws and kiss her with his big lips, but she resisted his moustaches and scuttled to the opposite corner of the arena, fruitlessly trying to pull herself over its walls. Mingi tried to approach her yet another time, but she kept crawling away.

"Hooked and reeled, dumb ass!" said Puchito before kicking open the western wall of the arena so hard that his right shoe flew off and hit a statuette of Zeus Pater on the head. The Bohemians were all shocked to see the crab scramble to the newly formed exit and desperately leap to her death, waving her claws in the air and hitting the floor with as much grace as a pair fresh eggs. One claw, two legs, and a

quarter of torso landed right in front of Montessor's nose.

"You see, SHE WOULD RATHER DIE THAN LOOK AT YOU!" said Puchito while shaking his head at the dismembered remains.

Mingi slowly dragged himself to the edge of the table and looked down at what his ugliness had caused, knowing very well that death could never be staged. For the first time in millions of years, he flipped on his back and turned white, staring up at his better and uttering "Hijo de Puta [son of a bitch]" before entering his millennial slumber.

Puchito dropped back on his chair. "I have the deepest respect for the bug," he said, "but as I learned from my own experience, no one can stand to be publicly humiliated by a female."

"Campeon! Campeon! Puchito is Campeon!" we all cheered as we lifted our hero in the air. Though wearing what appeared to be the beginning of a smile, he demanded that we put him down immediately, for we "should be ashamed to act this way while calling ourselves Bohemians."

"You should be proud to have done this noble act of altruism for Andrew Jackson and the world," said the Professor, clapping his hands together and speaking with much gravitas.

As Jackson's planet turned her shoulder into the new day, Puchito Bonano searched through piles of fallen books for his lost shoe. "Pride? Altruism?" he

said while vigorously waving a statuette of the mighty Zeus Pater up-and-down by the head, "next time you happen to be in Calcutta, you tell that loafer Andrew Jackson and his incompetent Indians that, though he may be burnt-out from having botched up our planet for just five billion years, Puchito Bonano is a professional who *always* gets the job done. Altruism? I was trying to save my own ass—did you think that I'd be dumb enough to leave this job to those Lagash people, so that I'd end up like those dead lizards in the museum?"

Though Puchito's character had not changed for the better after his invaluable service to the world, Professor Rivarolla hugged him and loved him all the more for his God-given talent. The Bohemians celebrated for eight days at Don Plati's lavish mansion, but their hero made it a point never to attend, claiming that he'd be "the only boludo keeping a kernel of Bohemian tradition alive in our province." He carried out this noble deed by sitting alone at the Astoria and insulting the passersby. "Puchito," said Don Pellegrino while wiping down an outside table, "instead of scaring away a working man's clientele, why don't you go kill hours at that rich man's party? I hear it's in your honor."

"Agh!" said Puchito, pinching his nose, "I don't know what the big fuss is all about. I mean, I could've just as easily saved *eight* of these iron tachos [trash cans]. It's not like we won the World Cup!"

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