

FRANCISCO SUNIAGA

Three excerpts

1.

From *The Other Island*

Chapter I

Dieter Schlegel went over to the veranda, stared out for a long time at the seascape before him and concluded that the god who created that fragment of nature could never have been German as himself. The god that gave birth to that space could never have come from a particular school or followed any particular method; he had no sense of harmonious composition and it was clear that he gave his whims free rein over and above any aesthetic principles. Whoever composed that wonderfully absurd spot must have been an impetuous Caribbean deity, shaken by some kind of tropical delirium back in the days when art still did not exist: the sea, the sky, even the smell in the air, were blue. Not all the same shade though. The cut-off he had designed to separate the ocean from the sky was sharp, abrupt and so endlessly straight that when you looked at it you could only believe that the earth was indeed flat and ended, as if cut by a knife, at the line on the horizon. In the centre, distant and diffused by the haze that had not yet lifted, he positioned an island of brown rock, too lonely and too big, surrounded by tireless breakers. To the extreme left, closer in, he created a peninsula and calm waters that projected a half-moon of sand, too white, a long beach sprinkled with clumps of seaweed, toasted by the sun, where the multi-coloured fishing boats rested, their prows pointing seawards. To the other extreme, far away in the distance, behind the deep green of a row of palm trees that offered their shade to the edge of the shore, the land stretched out to sea so that mortals, later of course, could build a town and a port. In the air, blue, he painted sea gulls, pelicans and other birds –whose names Dieter did not know– incessantly performing their pirouettes as they pinpointed the flashes of scales in the water.

A boat full of fishermen came into the bay and Dieter watched it until its crew leapt out onto the sand and made ready to beach her. Their voices, drifting in the breeze, just reached him over the murmur of the sea, but he made no effort to work out what they were saying. Even if they had been standing right alongside him he couldn't have deciphered that pagan and impenetrable Spanish –for all intents and purposes a secret code– the language of the seafarers. Somewhere between admiring and dumbfounded, he was content observing how even though they were all shouting in unison and each of them appeared to be doing his own thing, they somehow dragged the boat over the beach and left it safely where not even the most daring high tide could reach it. Admiration for the skill with which they plied their trade, and dumbfounded because the way in which they stubbornly insisted on demolishing his cultural and genetic heritage: again he was in the presence of the empirical evidence that collective efforts can be resolved well and amazingly efficiently in the midst of a chaos where everyone gives orders that no one follows. What he understood in those fishermen's manoeuvre was the very synthesis of that land and its inhabitants, the all-defining trait to be used to explain it to Germans who knew nothing about it: Margarita, that utopic isle, the only place on earth where everybody was in charge and nobody obeyed orders.

There were four of them and they performed their jobs in a harmonious flow; a continuous, artistic task, as if they were performing an ancestral dance that they knew by heart. Two of them took the outboard motor, unlatched it from its stern mounting and hoisted it onto the shoulders of a third member who looked, from a distance, like the strongest of the crew, then, without interrupting their movements, they lifted a basket overflowing with fish from the bottom of the boat, covered it with a piece of canvas and carried it, holding on to the handles. The fourth one, who appeared to be the oldest, took the bucket with the fishing tackle and the empty metal gasoline tank and trudged along a few steps behind his mates. Dieter watched them pass by in front of his terrace, rapt in the happy jumble of their voices and laughs, and it suddenly occurred to him for the first time that if he had been born here he could well have been one of them. A lowly fisherman, an unrepentant reaper, hardened by all that time at sea, with his plaited date-palm sombrero and sun-bleached clothes who in the latitude and longitude of this hour of his life, was passing with his mates in front of the terrace of a restaurant where an old fat blonde foreigner was observing him curiously. The idea of swapping his life for the life of any one of those

fishermen was a pleasant thought and nudged him into continuing the projection of that vital arc of another possibility for himself he had just discovered. If he were one of those fishermen, in ten minutes he would be in there among the shanties, in the shack with a zinc roof that serves as a bar and distribution centre, arguing about the price of the catch with the wholesalers. They would settle on a price after a lengthy to and fro of bargaining that would have sent any other human crazy, full of distracting manoeuvres ranging from an apparent lack of interest in reaching a deal to bitter tirades verging on insults. Then he would have several beers, as many as he felt like, even if it wasn't yet eleven in the morning. At the end of the day's work, the money from the catch fresh in his pocket, he would sit and tell jokes and yarns about the sea with his mates before going home to soak the salt out of his skin and complete the ritual of the reapers: eat, sleep and make love. Work was over and he would not be going back to trust his nomadic luck to the sea again until dawn the next day. And Dieter, the other man, the German cook, slumped back on the veranda and sighed with envy.

The terrace from which Dieter the German watched Dieter the fisherman as he went by, was his favourite spot in *Hans*, the restaurant he had set up when he first set foot on Margarita, when prospects indicated that the German tourists would visit it with the same frenzy with which they invaded Mallorca every summer. He bought the place from a Lebanese merchant who was more interested in gambling than in running a restaurant and who confessed to him, when offering the place for sale, that the only dream he had left was to go to New York. The Arab's place was a sort of clandestine hide-out, a filthy hovel with a terminal atmosphere, an unbreathable air that condensed under the red asbestos roof, boiling hot under the sun, and frequented only by men who came to bet on horses, boxing matches and baseball games. An assortment of coloured plastic chairs and tables that looked older than they could possibly have been were strewn around the room in no particular order, the only furniture. It was a depressing dry-dock of humanity where the luckless and shipwrecked souls came to get drunk half on alcohol and the rest on sickly ballads of forsaken love that strained from a jukebox imprisoned behind rusty iron bars. The dump was also infested with skeletal cats covered with sores that came over from the neighbouring shanties to fight over the scraps of fried sardines that the Lebanese served along with the bottles of beer.

As soon as he had formalized the purchase and taken possession of the business, Dieter closed it to the public and set out to refurbish it. The first thing he did, convinced that it would uplift the "soul" of the place, was to change its name. He had someone take down the faded and corroded sheet metal sign with its advert for a brand of beer that was no longer available in the market and which read *Mesón Libanés-Venezolano del Caribe Cervecería Tasca Bar Restaurante*. In its place he temporarily hung a board in the shape of a fish, painted white with green letters that announced the place's new name: *Dieter's*. But after a couple of weeks had passed and the idea of owning his own restaurant with his own name still meant having an old dream come true, he was faced with a problem that would never have occurred to him before. It was a minor complication but one that could well have a severe commercial impact: he couldn't find a single person who could pronounce Dieter correctly. Everyone, employees, labourers, contractors, local authorities and neighbours, regardless of his on-going didactic efforts, accentuated the first 'e' and endlessly rolled the final 'r'. The result, *Diéteerrrrrr*, was horrible; an utterance as hard as iron, even in Spanish, that sounded too off-key to be German and even had him making an effort to recognize his own name.

The solution was offered by a fellow-countryman who rented out scuba-diving equipment at a nearby marina. His name was Winfried Apfelbaum, veteran of the German merchants residing on the island and who, faced with a similar problem, had re-christened his business "Manzanillo", the name of a local tree with small green fruit, miniature poisonous apples, that was quite close to a Spanish translation of his name. Caught in a linguistic trap, Dieter's only way out was to swallow his pride and hunt around for another name for his business. He opted for "*Hans*", a name with a certain pull in a place where the majority of the foreign tourists came from Germany and which could be read quite easily in Spanish too. The island folk, who put the contraction "cas'e" ("house of") in front of almost every place name, ended up calling it "cas'eján" and after a few months, the term "vamos pa'cas'eján" ("let's go over to Hans's place") took root in the local slang, so familiar that Dieter used it as a publicity catchphrase on the local radio. The hit slogan, however, had an undesirable and irreversible side effect: everyone called him Hans too and that was his name forever after.

Dieter transformed the Lebanese's place from top to bottom. Along the front he planted palm trees and sea-grapes, beautiful trees with big rounded leaves that he found out about in Margarita with reddish fruit similar to small grapes. He fitted it out with Indonesian-style furniture

that he bought in the free port stores and decorated it with old pieces of Margarita fishing tackle and antique boat parts he found in the Hamburg flea market on one of his trips to Germany. He demolished the back wall so as to open it out onto the sea and by taking advantage of the difference of height with the street, had a wooden terrace built that faithfully reproduced the stern of the Margarita boats that sail to the Guyanas and the Amazon delta to fish for red snapper. He entrusted this job to an old shipwright - Pigmali3n Zabala he was called - who, true to his name and once his work was finished, fell in love with her and went around bewailing the fact that the *Hans* never set sail. Dieter conceded that to a point Pigmalion was right because from the beach the *Hans* didn't look anything like a restaurant but rather the biggest red snapper fishing boat in the Caribbean that had run aground capriciously on that flat piece of coastline. She was the boat in which Dieter, the German cook who might have been a fisherman had he been born there, who got violently seasick even on a transatlantic ocean liner but who yearned to cross the seas, could set sail on imagined ocean voyages every morning, moored in port before the feeding frenzy of lunch time, and every evening, with rum and tobacco, adrift in the wind under the colours of twilight.

About a hundred meters beyond his terrace, the four fishermen came up from the shore and went in among the shacks and were lost from his sight. It wouldn't be until the next morning that he could gaze again at Dieter the fisherman who he had just caught sight of as he walked along the beach and who was now in some hut or other drowning his thirst with beer even though it was still only eleven o'clock in the morning. And Dieter the German cook and land-bound sea-lion, felt an extraordinary emptiness inside, a back-to-front aching for that other existence that he imagined to be fuller than his and for which he began to feel nostalgic even though he had not lived a single day of it.

The sun's rays filtered through the improvised latticework of the fronds of the coconut palm and touched him with a serene heat which he imagined to be the same comfortable warmth that gave birth to life. He stretched slowly and lazily, opened out his arms and exposed himself to the light with all the pleasure of a pelican down on the beach. An image that sketched a nice idea to him of his own sloth and made him feel that the voluptuousness irradiated by his surroundings had penetrated the very marrow of his bones. As usually occurred when he allowed himself to be trapped by this sensation, and moved by the human tendency to contrast everything, he set to thinking about Germany, about Frankfurt am Main, the city where he was born. There it would be about four in the afternoon and would likely be a dank and dark winter day. The freezing February winds would be sweeping the streets almost bereft of people: men and women with drawn faces and joints stiffened by the freezing cold, hurrying to get to a sheltered spot; office and store employees from the centre of town leaving work at this hour, rushing to the entrance of the metro; thousands would be waiting impatiently for trains stretched along the station platforms, cloaked in darkness, silenced by winter, looking forward to a spring that would be a long time coming. The contrast couldn't possibly be more favourable, he thought jokingly, taking in the brilliant blue around him and looking down at the clothes he was wearing this morning: khaki pants cut off at the knee, sandals and a short-sleeve shirt open to his navel; he felt consumed by the unthinking happiness of the pelican on the beach opening its wings wide to the sun.

Spellbound as he was by his thoughts, he did not notice the woman who had come out onto the terrace from inside the restaurant. When he caught sight of her, she was already very close and he could not help giving a slight start on feeling that she was the weird materialization of his thoughts: apart from the fact that she wasn't wearing a dark overcoat, the lady before him could be any one of the passengers getting ready to board a train on that icy station in Frankfurt, thousands of kilometres away. She was an elderly lady, around seventy -he reckoned- pale, thin and standing perfectly upright as if she were a retired ballet dancer. She seemed weary, something between insomnia and a look akin to sadness, that made the folds of her lean skin stand out, and covered the blue nuances of her eyes with a grey shadow, eyes that revealed great determination, eyes that on a better day would have competed with the sea that surrounded them with water on all sides.

Translated from the Spanish by John Holden

From the story “Infanta Margarita”:

Portrait

I remember this portrait quite well. For years it hung from a nail on a wall at grandmother Luisa Ramona’s house in El Mamey. It was a black and white photograph the size of a postcard, mounted on a sheet of glass, framed by a strip of green adhesive paper of about two centimeters width, and blue corner backs of the same material; and on the bottom, in insecure handwriting in white, the word *Souvenir*. The framing was the work of Arabian travelling merchants, turned into frame craftsmen, who some forty years ago, going door to door and in a couple of days, framed the short photographic history of our neighborhood families.

It is the only portrait of my brother and me when we were children. We are posing hand in hand, dressed in short dark pants, the trouser legs too wide for our skinny legs; and white shirts crossed by suspenders, probably red.

Both of us stand in a corner, decorated by an indefinable curtain and a worn rug, which even in the black-and-white photograph showed the outrageous color of its flowers. A scenery that Savignac --a French immigrant, a veteran of war, who opened a photo studio in Porlamar in the late forties, and was a sort of official cameraman of Margarita since then-- used for all portraits in those years, and that one inevitably found in other homes as background to newlywed couples, to graduating high school students, to recruited soldiers in brand new uniforms or to children in first communion outfits. According to the date on the back, I was six and my brother was five years old. The fear perhaps caused by the photographic apparatus in the studio seemed reflected on my face, mixed with a certain empathy for my brother, whose face is so sad, so very sad, so incredibly sad, that even now, whoever looks at the picture feels his grief and can’t avoid asking themselves why that child was so contrite.

“He was not sad. He was sick, and since I thought he would die, I asked their father to take them to Porlamar and get a portrait of them together, so he would not forget his little brother later on.” That was the explanation my mother gave anyone who asked, but I think she was confused about something, or just ignored, not being with us that day -- and by the law of *omertá* that rules relationships between boys-- the true reason for my brother’s melancholy.

The reason for that sad face was there, in the very photograph, in the shoes we were wearing that day. Mine, brown cowboy boots with two white stripes in the shape of a V and a star, from Texas I suppose, in the middle. Boots that no sooner had I put on turned me into an authentic cowboy, like the ones in Sunday matinee movies, and which happened to be mine by a fortuitous coincidence. Someone brought them for the grandson of miss Giña -- a neighbor, friend and companion of my parents’ political misfortunes -- from the United States, and they were too small for him.

Wonderful cowboy boots, even more so if you compared them to the conventional black city boots with straps and buckle that my brother wore; even though they were fine for the city--and even though my father made every effort to present them as “detective boots”—were no good for horseback riding and fighting bandits and Indians at gunpoint. Before we took the portrait, and on my brother’s insistence, we went to all the shoe stores in Porlamar looking for boots like mine, but cowboy boots like those were not to be found on that Margarita, a poor island of fishermen and smugglers of cheap merchandise.

To make matters worse, that afternoon it rained very hard; we were tired of walking around Porlamar and our father was never a patient guy. I think it was in the store of Coppola, an Italian shoemaker, near the old market, where he finally bought those strap and buckle black boots, “detective” boots, in which, for all of his stubborn outbursts, my brother ended being photographed in, with a sad face, an incredibly sad face, so much so that he looked like he was sick and about to die.

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From the novel *Truman’s Passenger*.

Chapter XXII

His departure is the saddest event I have ever had to live through. Nothing caused me a sorrow such as that. We set out early that day, still in the dark, from the house of his brother in law, Angel Alamo. You must remember it, a house on the first roundabout of Campo Alegre main street, the one that was still there until recently, until the nineteen eighties, when they tore it down to put up a building. In those years Caracas was still cold at dawn and I remember there was a fine drizzle that morning, like a mist that barely dampened us, the last breath of the previous nights’ tempestuous rain. We crossed the streets of the deserted city in big black automobiles, three Cadillacs they had sent from Miraflores as a courtesy from Medina. Nothing was more akin to a funeral procession than our meager caravan.

With him was his wife, Isabel; his sister Hildegar Escalante; his brother in law, Angel; his nephew, Miguel, a doctor and a couple of presidential officers. In the car leading the march there were four of us: Doctor Escalante, curled up with Miss Isabel in the back seat; the driver and myself. No one said a word during the journey, except for her. After we left the city behind and took the road to La Guaira, for a while she spoke very softly to Doctor Escalante, a tender whisper, like a

mother rocking a child who is sick or scared. And Doctor Escalante was ailing from both. He felt lost, he did not know what ailed him, and from the night unto the morning he had gone from being the man who would make decisions in representation of all Venezuelans, to someone who was no longer allowed to make his own decisions, who depended on the will of others.

The road we travelled to La Guaira was deserted and we crossed very few cars along the way. The light of day had begun to show timidly on the orient when we reached the curve where the sea first appears to travelers. But that morning no one could have said the sea was there. In its place a blanket of thickening gray haze erased the horizon in the distance and blended into the dawn's violet sky.

It is true that we tend to project our moods and give the landscape what is only in our minds, but not that time. For me, that sea with no horizon, extended infinitely between gray and violet into deepness, corresponded perfectly with the uncertainty of our destiny. I thought of another morning, barely a month ago, that bright morning of our arrival, when thousands of people and more than one thousand two hundred vehicles descended to Maiquetia airport. We reentered Caracas amidst the greatest jubilation; it was the arrival of Jesus to Jerusalem to celebrate Easter, a true Palm Sunday.

In contrast, our wordless departure, our flight in those three black Cadillacs, silent, like a malignant illness, was like Holy Friday, where not even believers went to the grave.

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