Guillermo Rubio Arias-Paz

Strange Destinies

six stories about coincidence

the endless BOOKCASE

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DEDICATION AND THANKS

This book is dedicated to the memory of my cousin, brother-in-arms and in adventure, Eduardo Rubio Castañera, Lalo. It was with him that I discovered Madrid: one of the many Madrids that exist, but without a doubt one of the best. And without him I would never have discovered Paraty, the real Paraty, its hidden secrets, its parties and its gods.

The list of people I have to thank for helping this book see the light of day would be long and emotional for me, and tedious for the reader. You know who you are; you are in Cantabria, Bilbao, Madrid and Barcelona, and some are much further afield. Thank you all, from the bottom of my heart.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guillermo Rubio Arias-Paz is Spanish and grew up in Santander in northern Spain before moving to Madrid, the city of his birth at the age of sixteen. After graduating in Information Science, he worked for many years in marketing but now spends his time doing what he always wanted to do, namely, writing. And in order to do so, he has returned to northern Spain.

Guillermo has published two trilogies (*Paraty* and *Madrid*) in Spain in a single volume entitled *Destinos Insólitos* (Strange Destinies). He explores the diffuse genre of the novella in three rural tales set in the Brazilian countryside and three urban tales set in Madrid, which with their descriptions of people and places are reminiscent of the Spanish literary style of *costumbrismo*.

Guillermo has also written a book of poems, several essays and a play. He is currently working on a book about life in the Spain of his childhood, and also on a long novel set in Spain and Morocco, a country he is very familiar with.

PRELIMINARY NOTE

The stories below are the fruit of my imagination, but combined with real events. Some of the characters are real, and some still walk Madrid's streets and Paraty's beaches and paths, so sometimes I have been obliged to conceal their names.

The places described in Spain and Brazil, in the states of Sao Paulo and Río de Janeiro, all exist. At least for now.

I am the disorganized maker of the hiddenmost routes
and most secret moorings.
Their uselessness and unknown location
nourish my days.

Otras noticias sobre Maqroll el Gaviero
Álvaro Mutis

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THE PARATY MONSTER

PROLOGUE

When I stopped my Fusca in front of the wooden shed that appeared on the right-hand side of the unpaved slope, my old car and I were on the verge of collapse. We had been bouncing along for two hours, avoiding bottomless potholes and rocks as big as mountains, grazing precipices and skating over clayey soil soaked by a recent downpour. The road snaked through the lush jungle, offering - in the rare moments when I dared take my eyes off the road - scenes of spectacular beauty veiled by the mist.

Some acquaintances in Sao Paulo, whom I had visited on behalf of my publisher, had lodged me in their house in the city. I told them I wanted to visit Paraty, having heard of its great bay, its beaches and islands, and its cobbled town centre that flooded whenever the tide came in. My hosts encouraged me to go, but to take the inland rather than the coastal route, as when the road crossed from the state of Sao Paulo to Río de Janeiro it became a natural park that had managed to shed its tarmac, at least for the moment. Every electoral campaign saw renewed rumours that the road would be repaired; a political promise that had remained unfulfilled on several occasions, partly due to the opposition of the ecologists. But now the rumours seemed well founded, so I did not hesitate to take their advice as I wanted to make the most of seeing that route before they committed murder by tarmac.

The feeling that this was my last chance had spurred me to buy a car instead of making the trip to Paraty by bus as I had

originally intended. I also thought it would help me be more self-reliant on my Brazilian journey with no planned route or duration; I would sell it at the end. The paperwork was complex and tedious for a foreigner; in the end, to hasten the sale, the car was registered in my hosts' name.

With my far-from-splendid acquisition, I had left Sao Paulo on the motorway to Río de Janeiro. The car was not particularly fast, so I was glad to leave the motorway when I reached Guaratinguetá, where I took the diversion east towards Cunha, so as to reach Paraty by descending the Bocaina Mountains. This is the ancient Gold Road, but not only of gold, also of silver and coffee. For decades, all these products were in their day transported by mules and slaves from Minas Gerais to Paraty Bay where they were shipped to the Old World.

That afternoon the rain turned the descent through the natural park into the anteroom to Hell. The few unpaved kilometres could be done in less than an hour if all went well, but I had been warned that often things did *not* go well. The same Brazilians who had told me about this pass, had regaled me with anecdotes that they themselves had experienced: a bus with a puncture taking up the narrow road; a lorry descending with its electric brake at maximum, going slower than a walking pace. But they had also talked about sunny or at least clear days when the route became a drive in heaven, through one of the last native forests that remained near Río de Janeiro's coast.

When I left the tarmac at the top of the mountain range and began my descent, it had already been pouring for some time. The water was eating away the already difficult track; every stone was a threat to the sump; every pothole, a puddle of unknown depth; every curve - however slowly I drove - might well be the last I would take in my life. It stopped raining halfway down the mountainside, but the state of the road did not improve; it just became easier to see the precipice into which I was about to fall.

In this state of affairs and after almost two hours of tension, the sight of an inhabited spot beside the road seemed like salvation to me. Its appearance was not exactly very inviting, but the sign for a soft drink brand left no doubt it was a bar. I stopped in front of the door and walked into a small enclosure made of wooden boards. I spied a rickety bar, also badly made of boards. Blue plastic bags sagged between the ceiling boards, dripping rain. But the bar's charm was greater than appeared from outside: the entire place gave on to a terrace hanging over the last virgin valley of the Bocaina Mountains before one reached the coastal plane leading to Paraty. I gazed at the view for a while in silence, smelling the humidity that mixed with the smell of brakes and overheated car that wafted in from the track. My car was still steaming out there. I leant on the handrail over the valley, contemplating soaking wet Nature, oblivious to everything else, but when I turned around, a man was standing behind the bar, watching me. I said hello and asked for a beer.

After placing a bottle and a glass on the table nearest me, he asked me where I was from, which did not surprise me as my accent always gave me away in Brazil. Normally, after explaining my country of origin and that I didn't like football, the conversation would end. This time, however, the talk did not die after the first answer, nor did the old man talk about football. He was a man of calm speech and penetrating gaze. He began talking about the scenery and the storm, then about my car, having owned a similar one himself many years earlier. While we talked, I drank and he smoked. His conversation revealed the wisdom of age. I have never believed that all the elderly are wise, yet an elderly person may have special wisdom that is unattainable to the young, though it may be just a matter of time.

Was he an old man? Watching him, I thought maybe he was not much over fifty. At that age appearances vary enormously depending on the life people lead. In him, the fifty-odd years – if that was his age – had resulted in a skin as

wrinkled and hard as an old shoe, stretched over a thin wiry body. His week's stubble was almost completely white and stood out against skin darkened by the sun. His features were sharp. His small expressive eyes were dark yellow like the fingers of his left hand, which held the cigarettes that he rolled unhurriedly one after the other.

He was called Valmer or Velmer; I am not sure which, as I was too ashamed to keep on asking, and the sounds escaped in a blur between his few teeth. Our talk became more animated. We chatted about Spain, our habits and the hours we keep; we chatted about the countries I had visited and my life in a big city; we chatted about Europe and her cold winters. Then, as I often do, I had a sudden impulse to leave, and continue on my way.

It was getting late and I would reach Paraty in the dark. I paid for the beer, said goodbye and climbed into my old Fusca. I turned the key. Silence. I turned it again. Nothing. Alarmed, I looked at Valmer. He was watching from the door to the bar, without showing much surprise. No surprise at all, in fact. I turned the key and let the car roll forwards in gear for a few metres, before taking my foot off the clutch. Nothing. Except that now the car was near a bend in the road, thirty metres further down from the bar. I got out of the car and asked the man for help. By now he was approaching slowly, trying to avoid slipping in the small orange stream that flowed along the road. He took a look at the engine, touched a few parts, and then tried to start the engine. Nothing. He shook his head, looking at me. Night was falling and there was no cover for my vehicle. Valmer had no telephone or means of locomotion other than a bicycle, which he offered me, while advising me not to use it given the state of the road and it being night. I thought of walking down the road until I found a mechanic willing to help me. It was hopeless. Valmer told me the nearest person lived five kilometres away in a village where there was no garage. So, resigned, I accepted his invitation to spend the night in his house.

We pushed the car away from the side of the road. Then I followed my host up the track. Next to the bar a narrow path ran down to a banana grove, and with the last light of day I could just make out a rather dilapidated house among the trees. We went inside. It was a bit bigger than the bar and some inquisitive children peered around a door, laughing, amazed at my presence. I asked Valmer if they were his children. They were his nephews, the children of his sister who lived in Paraty.

His wife appeared, held out her hand shyly and disappeared behind a curtain; I heard her moving about in what must have been the kitchen. We sat down on two wicker chairs by a fire that crackled, throwing shadows on the walls; there was no electric light. Valmer rolled another cigarette, and then remembered he had no beer in the house and offered to get some from the bar, but I told him it was unnecessary. He went through the curtain and returned with a bottle of *cachaça:* honey-coloured moonshine with dark leaves in it. He offered me some and I accepted. It was smooth and tasty. I gestured my approval and he smiled and refilled my glass, saying, 'Natural *pinga.* I make it myself, adding herbs to the sugar cane.*'* He held the bottle up, and in the firelight his wiry finger with a nail as hard as a shell pointed to various leaves, telling me the names of the plants. I cannot remember them, which is just as well for Valmer's secret, as it was the best *pinga* I had tried.

The woman reappeared when we were finishing our third glasses. First, she placed an oil lamp on the low table between us and the fire, then she went back to the kitchen and reappeared with a dish of stewed chicken, another of rice, and a plate of *farofa,* all of which she placed beside the lamp on the table. I thanked her and she gave me a shy furtive smile before disappearing again.

Valmer and I ate and drank in silence for a while. The children no longer peered at us, either because they had been told off by the woman or because they had tired of the novelty;

at times they could be heard laughing or talking among themselves somewhere behind the heavy curtain.

The fire and the food left us thoughtful. The *pinga* was raising my melancholy a notch, so I was grateful when Valmer broke the silence and asked what I was doing in such a godforsaken corner of the world. What was I searching for? I do not think he was aware of the depth of his question, or maybe he was; the fact is I told him about the last few years of my life with a sincerity I had not had with anyone until then, not even with myself, I think. I told him about the success of my first novel a few years earlier, which had earned me money and a good contract for another two books with a publisher. I told him how the second novel had been a flop, with only one edition published, which had not covered the expenses of the contract. I then talked about the third novel, which the publisher had refused to publish. And I ended by acknowledging my frustration at no longer being able to create a story worth publishing. I had become the writer of just one book. In my fight against that reality I had been travelling for two months and had arrived in Brazil two weeks earlier.

I told him I had visited some people in Sao Paulo out of courtesy to my publisher in Spain, and it was they who had told me about the route through the mountains. So here I was, travelling in search of inspiration but incapable of writing two consecutive pages; every idea that I drafted was a dead end, every beginning became an insurmountable wall of tedium. So I had given up.

The woman returned with a pot of coffee and two glasses, before disappearing again. We drank the coffee; he smoked, while I went back to the *pinga* he had stopped drinking.

He smiled before speaking again, and told me that to write stories it was not necessary to invent them. ‘You just have to look around you; things happen that no imagination would be capable of inventing. But they are real, they happen, they are there for those who know how to see them and want to tell

them.’ Then, after exhaling a great cloud of smoke, he added, ‘I'm going to tell you a story. A true story. If you're a writer you'll be able to make it known to other people.’ He drank some more coffee, rolled his umpteenth cigarette with his large, dirty yellow fingers, and began to speak.

CHAPTER 1

When Pedro got off the bus in Paraty station after an absence of three years, he felt the urge to repeat the same actions that had taken him to the Pousada Internacional the first time he had stayed in that town. He had stayed there for over a month, and now he needed to perform some kind of exorcism, an act that would conjure up once and for all the solitude that had filled his stay in that magical place, unique in the world, on Río de Janeiro's coast.

Despite his accumulated weariness after many sleepless nights, or perhaps because of the new loneliness of his journey, he did not go straight to the inn. He was travelling light with just a backpack, so he started to walk, eating leisurely from a bag of crisps he had bought at an earlier stop. After putting the unfinished packet carefully away in a side pocket of his backpack, he set off for the old part of town. He was not worried that the inn might be closed at this time of year; it was early southern autumn and there were few tourists, so he would be able to find a place to sleep, even though the exorcism would not be complete anywhere else.

When he reached the old town he saw again how the uneven cobbled streets forced you to look down at the ground. Paraty is one of those places that only reveal all their beauty to those who stand still. If you walk, you have to do so while trying not to twist your ankle on its untouchable pavements: world heritage stones that are the pride of the town but the bane of pedestrians.

It is even worse if you try to explore the historical centre on a bicycle or motorbike, a mistake he had made on his

previous stay; you are so likely to fall, that driving through that magical multicoloured town centre becomes very stressful. Even if you manage not to fall off, your body will end up bruised by every pothole and every stone. And forget going by car. Most of the centre is off limits to private cars; if you insist, you will end up down by the docks on the right-hand edge of town, and then have to endure the torture of cobblestones that prevent cars from going any faster than at a walking pace, and you will most likely be forced to come to a halt in a street that is becoming flooded with the rising tide. Reaching the end of the world in a vehicle can, in Paraty, mean having to leave it half submerged and stranded for a few hours until the tide subsides; hours that can be spent walking peacefully through the streets in search of a crane to get you out of your fix. In short, Paraty is not for those in a hurry.

Those thoughts swirled around Pedro's head whilst he walked slowly, choosing carefully where to place each foot, until he reached one of the benches in the peaceful Matriz Square, where he did the best thing you can in Paraty: he sat down. He rested while looking at the leafy trees in which hidden birds chirped. He looked at the large blue and white church, beside which some children played football in a concrete yard. Some were barefoot, others in trainers; they played and laughed while the afternoon shadows covered the whole square.

Retracing his steps from his former visit in an increasingly premeditated way as his memories returned, he left the church veranda behind him and crossed the esplanade towards the bridge that connected the historical centre with the Pontal beach area. Beneath the bridge - a simple white arch almost submerged in the water - the river flowed peacefully, its dark waters moving in the opposite direction to what you would expect from a river, being pushed by the tide towards the steep peaks in the distance that filled the sunset sky with green.

Small *escunas* - local boats with a simple material roof to protect the fishermen from the sun - bobbed lonely on the river,

tied to the moorings of the town's historical centre. Pedro paused for a long while, overwhelmed by the beauty around him, thinking how he was there again and alone again; he had no one with whom to share such beauty.

Another short walk took him to Pontal beach where, his feet remembering an old path walked many times in the past, he reached the Pousada Internacional, whose open door erased any doubts he might have about where to stay. Before he could enter, he saw the innkeeper peering around the doorway and looking with curiosity at a familiar face she could not quite put a name or memory to. Pedro clarified who he was, and was kissed and hugged and made to remember his long stay there three years earlier. The conversation turned to trivial matters and Pedro began to wonder why he had wanted to return to that inn, one of dozens in Paraty, when the fact was he had not been happy there. True, it was at the foot of the beach, but far from the centre; it was comfortable, but no more than any other inn. The innkeeper was too talkative and, with that open frankness so typical in Brazilians, had told him how sad he had looked when he had arrived from Spain on his previous trip.

Yet he liked that place. He also remembered something the innkeeper had told him about an unfaithful husband who had ended by leaving her. So he asked about her suffering; from the little she replied, he gathered she had accepted it as you accept the inevitable: in silence.

They spent the rest of the afternoon drinking beer and remembering the nights they had shared in conversation. Three years earlier he had believed with wishful thinking that she was a friend, simply because they had not allowed sex to come between them and change everything. Now, in the conversation of their re-encounter, he realized those nights had been unexceptional, nothing more than forced talk between an innkeeper and her only client, both of them ill with loneliness. And that the story was beginning to repeat itself.

THE TRUTH ABOUT ROBERTO NELSON

CHAPTER 1

The coffee was quite cold when Marta raised it to her lips. Even so, she took a sip, followed by a sigh of resignation. She had been in her office a long time, alone; through the transparent partition she saw that the large editorial office was deserted. It was night, after eleven. Between picking up the little burning cup from the coffee machine and now, when the taste of cold coffee brought her back to reality, she had become so engrossed in what she was reading that she had not been aware that her journalist workmates were leaving. Not all of them. She heard the voice of her boss, the editor-in-chief of the Nacional, calling from the next-door office, ‘Marta, you're there, aren't you?’

Workmates. It wasn't a word that fitted her opinion of them. Nor theirs of her. The difference lay in that it seemed to matter to them, but not to her. She searched for another word that better suited reality. Colleagues? That had been her dream at university. To have professional colleagues. Later, after meeting the newspaper's writers, the dream had shattered. She remembered the exact moment when they began to look at her differently: when she had managed to get an article published in three columns about the invasion of Chinese shops in the centre of Madrid. She had only been with the paper for four months, and was still an intern. Leapfrogging all the hierarchical steps, she had gone straight to the editor-in-chief of local news and told him what she was investigating; it was he who had given her permission to continue working on it. Now, two years later, she

had his post, and he, Alfredo Pastor, had been promoted to editor-in-chief of the Nacional.

'I'm here,' said Marta, aiming her voice at the half screen, transparent from the waist up, that separated her office from that of her boss. 'Have you thought of anything worse for my weekend?'

Marta remembered another night just like this, a few years earlier. She had known from the start that Alfredo's interest in the article about the Chinese wasn't genuine. He had simply let her get on with it, glad that one intern at least would not become a burden, like so many other students had, while gaining work experience. The newspaper's agreement of cooperation with the Complutense University meant that Alfredo had to accept final-year journalist students as interns. The advantages of the agreement did not trickle down to his department. He presumed there were some: access to exclusive information, or institutional prerogatives, in addition to the paper gaining a good image among the students. For him, however, the agreement meant a merry-go-round of new faces that spent three to six months in the editorial office, doing the most bureaucratic jobs. If any intern tried to contribute an idea to be developed into news, it was either nonsense or the intern was assigned an in-house writer who would take charge, which was even worse because the writers always considered the interns competition, and the article in question - even if it had the potential to become news - was always rejected. And if it *did* succeed in reaching the lofty heights of being published, it would appear under the name of the in-house writer. The interns accepted these rules of the game: when they left university they would be able to add to their CV their experience in a famous national newspaper.

Marta had realized all this after only a fortnight in the newsroom, and had borne it in mind when Alfredo had given her the go-ahead regarding the Chinese mafias. But she had left her town in the Mancha with the burning ambition to be a journalist

in a national newspaper. Her family, friends and first boyfriend, all of whom she had left in order to go to the capital, would read her name beneath news articles. She was not going to tolerate their taking advantage of her for nothing; that was not going to happen to her. She was not going to be just one more intern.

The article had been published in August, by which time she had graduated and was able to spend all her time investigating the Chinese mafias. She had not been able to sign it, but had taken advantage of the editor she depended on being away on holiday, to prevent it bearing anyone else's signature. The news item had uncovered a network that put pressure on traditional shopkeepers in the neighbourhood of El Rastro to sell their shops to the Chinese mafia, and a subsidiary network of extortion by these mafias over the Chinese shopkeepers themselves, who were forced to pay off handsomely the help they had received when buying their shops at a good price. All this in apparent connivance with local town councillors who had facilitated the permits for these shops and had allowed them to put up multicoloured neon signs on the sides of buildings that were officially protected. The information had provided names and facts that could not be denied, and the news had been echoed in other media. She, a simple intern, had never revealed her sources either to her nanny editor, who had cut short his holiday in an attempt to score a point, or the editor-in-chief of local news when he had asked her. That editor-in-chief had been Alfredo, and he *had* been able to take the credit for having had faith in her.

The mayor had had to face the music and promise to regenerate the city centre and recuperate the traditional shops. He had taken advantage of the news for electoral purposes, and had promised special surveillance on protected buildings, together with more respect for immigrants trying to forge a better life in our country through honest work. A councillor had been purged and expelled from his party. The mayor, a first-class

ONE NIGHT IN JUNE

CHAPTER 1

The Mercedes advanced almost soundlessly along the motorway from Sao Paulo to Río de Janeiro. The darkness of the night was softened by the contrast with inside the car: the indicator panel and dashboard were in darkness; it was impossible to see the speed, the engine revolutions, the oil pressure or the water temperature. Nothing. Only blackness up to the two white hands on the steering wheel. In front, the beam of light lit up the tarmac, with the Mercedes symbol silhouetted in the middle, as black as the night.

The radio cassette player did not work either, the original one from the factory. 'The car will depreciate in value if you change it; a 25-year-old model should have all the original parts; it's a classic, and classic things have their inconveniences', his partner had said. So the night, as well as being as black as his thoughts, was silent. Alone in the old Mercedes, Jorge mulled things over as he drove lazily along, his hands like two pale apparitions in front of him, the headlights swallowing the infinite rows of bright lines.

In addition to the headlights, the cruise control also worked, which he had set at 110 kph by the light of his lighter. He had decided to take the Ayrton Senna motorway, less busy in Sao Paulo's outskirts than the Dutra motorway. Later he would have to take the Dutra in Taubaté, but by the time he got there it would be night and there would not be much traffic, not as much as there was now on the Ayrton. After Taubaté he would go on to Guaratinguetá, and then turn east along a mountain road to

Cunha. He had spent the last three weeks there, practically buried on the estate in the middle of nowhere. And he was going back there, but this time for just one night. His last.

Almost alone on the motorway, Jorge went over all that had happened in the last few hours, which was the result of what had happened in the last few months, which in turn had its roots in a decision taken five years earlier, namely, to invest all his savings in a company with his friend Jaime, who exported Brazilian products to Europe. At first he had been able to combine this activity with his work in the bank, where he worked until three in the afternoon; when he got home, he had worked via email, telephone and skype, coinciding with the Brazilian workday. It had been a difficult beginning.

In less than a year the two activities had become incompatible: JJ Export had grown and begun to give its first profits, but had needed greater dedication. Jorge often had to travel to visit clients and control the arrival of products in the port, so in the end he negotiated his voluntary redundancy in the bank. When he left the central offices with his signed cheque and severance package, it was the first time in his life that he felt what the word 'freedom' meant. And to celebrate, he went out and painted the town red for three days and nights.

The decision to leave the bank - which he and his girlfriend had argued about for months - had, of course, had its consequences: Paloma had left him soon afterwards. But that was all so far behind him! Now he remembered his former girlfriend as a timid woman who needed the security of two monthly pay packets. She had used the three-day binge – on which she had only taken part on the first night - as an excuse, but behind it lay a radically different outlook on life. There was nothing he could reproach her for; it was he who had changed. Jorge accepted it. He was paying a reasonable price for attempting something different in his life.

The work helped him forget his breakup. It was as if the universe had decided to turn in his favour. His partner Jaime

THE DAY I LOST MY COOL

PROLOGUE

My name is Hilario Villaseca and a few years ago I lost my cool. Or maybe I simply didn't have any to lose and I just faked being calm, unconsciously, until one day I couldn't take any more. Bah! It doesn't matter. Anyway, with the hindsight that comes with time – and as you will see, I had a lot of time in which to reconsider – it cannot be denied that I lacked calm. Calm to reflect on what I wanted and what I didn't want to do. Calm to analyse and take a decision, instead of being carried away by events and other people's wishes. My deed was in response to searching for a way out, for a change I was unable to make using my head. In fact, I used everything except my head.

Yes, I definitely lacked the calm to change my life. The result was a complete and unpremeditated rupture caused by a self-defence mechanism with an irrational component. One day, suddenly, I could not take any more and I did what I did. I accept the punishment that was imposed on me, and I also accept society's need to defend itself from attitudes like mine; such behaviour – though inevitable - should be pursued by law.

All that surrounded me and made up my existence was shattered in a moment, causing pain and amazement. But however much I analyse it, however much I have gone over things, recreating the facts from other perspectives, I feel no remorse. My deed resulted in a death. Even so, even from that perspective, I do not feel sorry. I'm sorry for having been carried away by events and having exploded and let the situation turn against me, instead of analysing things and profiting from them.

I'm sorry for my clumsiness, that's all. Maybe I lack scruples but I have no ethical or moral problems with having killed that woman. She deserved it.

Nor do I miss the life I left behind. A comfortable life without surprises; a safe and placid life that disappeared and evaporated the moment I did what I did. Afterwards, rebuilding my former life would have been like trying to mend a glass jug broken into a thousand pieces: useless, because it would never be the same again, and absurd, because it was me who broke it, without having planned to do so but convinced deep down inside that I had to do it.

So, neither remorse nor nostalgia. Just acceptance that I must pay the penalty for what I did. And the assurance that when I regain my freedom my life will be very different. Nor do I know exactly what it will be like, nor what I shall do when I get out. The feeling that soon I shall have to take decisions again begins to be present in my dreams, which sometimes become a recurrent nightmare in which I see myself at the end of a long, cold and damp tunnel. Searching for the way out, I at last make out a diffuse light that gradually grows stronger. That source of light in my dark world has become - even when awake - a constant and obsessive presence, a luminous mouth only a few steps away and finally at hand. But when I reach the mouth of the tunnel the landscape is undefined: dense fog covers everything.

CHAPTER 1

That was my house, the stronghold of my life for thirty long years. Seeing the upsets that moving house had produced around me made me understandably cautious, even though the moves I had known, made always by third parties, had the incentive of being to a better and larger house. In my case it was a change of house I only accepted in order to avoid other changes I thought would be more traumatic: forced to choose between a wedding and a breakup that I considered equally terrifying, I found a way out in a period of premarital life lived together. 'It's a wedding or goodbye,' Carolina had said. I didn't want either; I didn't want changes in my life, so I resorted to the arguments at hand: the difficulty of living together, the need to know each other better, and finally, the fear of a failed marriage. None of them very original, I confess. But the latter was particularly useful, given my status as the child of divorced parents. When I saw how effective it was, I exploited it with skill, even melodramatics, sprinkling my childhood with sad memories and the absence of a father figure that in no way corresponded to the reality of my rather pleasant early years. A useful but bitter tactic that made me feel bad about myself, despite the positive results.

In fact my childhood had been fundamentally happy, with an adorable mother and servants who made my life and hers very comfortable. I seldom saw my father as he lived outside Madrid. I spent part of every summer with him and he called me frequently. He had sufficient means to pay my education without any problem, although I knew nothing about that; at home we never talked about money. I learned later that

the only people who talked about money were those who had none. My parents, who both worked in family businesses, were comfortably off. Later, when I was an adult, my father disappeared from my life, limiting his presence to a few phone calls on special days and a meal together on his rare visits to the capital.

So the sketch of my painful childhood in a broken family had little to do with my real experience but tipped the balance in my favour. The arguments about the "difficulty of living together" and the "need to know each other better" held no water after going out with Carolina for six years, spending weekends and holidays together, and visiting her family. (The only thing I refused to attend was the routine Sunday paella, though I went on rare occasions, and at which her father would invariably explain to me the importance of the water, which he brought all the way from his estate in Paterna, for making such an excellent paella as his.) In fact, Coexistence and Knowledge were enough, as she maintained.

The truth is we knew each other fairly well, which is perhaps why marrying her didn't enter my plans, but from there to wanting to break up was a big difference, and I did not want to do so. Leaving things as they were would have been perfect for me, but she had other ideas. Maybe on turning thirty she felt driven to start a family, but she got it into her head to have a wedding, to the point that she gave me an ultimatum. In the end we found the halfway point: living together, without having to go through either the courtroom or – another unresolved matter – the vicarage.

I cannot say I was bored with Carolina. Our relationship was calm and without any ups and downs. A relationship stabilized by time, where nothing was lacking. Nor was anything plentiful. But it filled a large gap in my emotional needs. Sharing a flat without first getting married, with a vague commitment regarding the duration, was a lesser evil: for the moment it freed me from preparing a wedding, which I refused to do without

A HOUSE IN TRINDADE

CHAPTER 1

I discovered Trindade when I had been working for almost two months at Sao Paulo University Hospital. I arrived in Trindade by chance, or better said, by a series of coincidences. A Colombian doctor and colleague at the hospital invited me to his birthday party at his house.

That in itself was the result of chance, as I wasn't known for my sociability. A large number of people off sick in the medical teams worked in my favour, plus delays in agreements with hospitals in neighbouring countries, with the result that on my arrival in Sao Paulo I became the only Spanish-speaking doctor in the Medical Research Laboratory apart from the Colombian. This colleague saw my name on the list of new collaborators: Carlos…. My surnames do not matter but are clearly Spanish, and to confirm my nationality it was only necessary to read what it said beneath my name: Salamanca University.

The Colombian introduced himself on my first day and said he had been working there for two years as an epidemiologist. He took his role as guide very seriously, which was very helpful to me in learning my way about the largest hospital in Latin America. The laboratory alone, the MRL, occupied – and still does – an entire building of the hospital, as well as departments in other areas of the immense group of buildings.

Thrown together by our linguistic affinity, as we got to know each other we became, if not exactly friends, at least good

companions. We worked on different projects: he, on malaria research through an agreement with Bogotá's San Juan de Dios Hospital; I, on molecular biology techniques for diagnosing tropical diseases, in collaboration with Salamanca University's Tropical Diseases Research Centre.

I hate to start relating the key moments of my life by concealing names, but neither will I give the Colombian's name; today he is world-renowned and will not want certain facets of his life made public. What is relevant for my story is that he invited me to his birthday, which was the first of the coincidences or the first cause of my going to Trindade's beaches.

I set off for the Colombian's flat on the underground, but when I reached a relatively close station I took a taxi to avoid getting lost in an unfamiliar neighbourhood. It was Saturday and the party was at midday. I was one of the first to arrive and my colleague came out to the lift to greet me. After giving him a coffee-table book on Andalucía – a Spanish edition bought in a bookshop in Sao Paulo, as I could not find anything on Salamanca or my home town in the north of Spain – and some beers and soft drinks, we went into the sitting room and from there to the large terrace. He introduced me to his wife and six-year-old son, who was dressed for the occasion in trousers and a jacket and reminded me of a dwarf in the court of some ancient king. The child showed no interest in me, for which I was grateful. The wife told me she was a lawyer, as we carried plates and cutlery to a table on the terrace, near the grill where her husband was beginning to cook the meat. The smoke made fanciful eddies before spiralling up and over the city. She had given up her work to live in Sao Paulo, but after two years here wanted to go back to her lawyer's office in Cali. Our conversation was soon exhausted, and she found a more talkative helper among the other guests who had arrived.

I wandered about the terrace, a guarana juice in my hand. The apartment was on the nineteenth floor, was much

bigger than mine and looked over the northeast of the city. Dozens of skyscrapers rose above the treetops, and planes took off and landed in a gap between the buildings, at Congonhas airport, which was swallowed up and invisible in the heart of the great city. I hadn't seen this airport before, having landed at the international one, but I had been told of the planes' spectacular landings between the skyscrapers. I drank my soft drink leaning on the rail, observing the city and, out of the corner of my eye, the arrival of the other guests.

There were over twenty of us, apparently all connected with the Colombian's work. Some people already knew me from the MRL and said hello. These included an attractive young laboratory assistant who helped in my research and had become my unofficial assistant. I knew she was a friend of the Colombian so I was not surprised by her being there; what surprised me was when she introduced me to her partner, and it was another woman. I *will* give *their* names: my young unofficial assistant was Claudina; her friend was Joelma.

Joelma was about fifty. I don't believe in auras or anything like that, but everything about her gave off determination behind her curly blond hair and perfect smile. She was broad shouldered and her age was more visible in the wrinkles of her tanned face than in her body. I confess I was initially surprised to see young Claudina with her, but soon realized Joelma was exceptionally attractive.

Apart from my hosts, those two women were the only people I talked to over the next hours, if I do not count greetings, short questions with polite answers and brief smiles with my mouth full. Everyone was nice to me, but as I don't drink much alcohol, I gradually became disconnected as the general level of drunkenness increased. Claudina and Joelma did not seem to drink much alcohol either, so we ended up sharing a table far from the hot coals and noise. We had a lively conversation in which we discussed, among other things, Spanish cinema, about which they knew as much if not more than I did. Luckily, I had

BRUNO GOES FOR A WALK

CHAPTER 1

The winter wasn't particularly cold but Bruno had to make an effort to overcome his laziness and go out on that grey morning. As he almost always did when he had no specific plan, he let his feet take him to the Retiro Park. It had rained during the night and the damp pavements were half empty as the weekday morning traffic dissipated. For a moment he thought of his usual companion on these walks. The walks he took at weekends. Only then did he have company.

Beneath his feet the pavement was slippery: the city's metallic armour that hates the rain. As he walked, he gazed at the shop windows. He walked down Gran Vía, crossed Cibeles and soon reached the park, which was more deserted than on other mornings, the threat of more rain not being conducive to strolling. But that made it all the more appealing to Bruno. Turning up the fur collar of his leather jacket, he strolled aimlessly through the park. Some musicians, lacking an audience, were practicing Peruvian folk songs beside the pond. Giving the blare from their loudspeakers a wide berth, he turned away from the busiest areas and soon found himself walking along rather abandoned-looking leafy avenues. He was now walking on damp earth with muddy areas and small puddles that he did nothing to avoid, putting both his boots and his maturity to the test; he loved stepping in puddles.

With his hands in his pockets and his head down, he let his thoughts wander while he gazed at the leaves that had fallen on the grey earth. Leaves that the heavy rain had torn off, and

which now lay stuck to the ground like untidy trading cards. Without looking up, he knew that the tree under which he was walking was different to the previous one, from the circles of leaves that carpeted every inch of the way. The ground resembled a large pop design with circles in different colours. After an area of dark lobed leaves that could only be from oaks, he found himself on a golden carpet of long leaves. He knew the tree but not its name, so he raised his head to take a look and realized with a start that he was standing in front of an elderly Asian man who was looking steadily at him from less than a metre away and holding his arms to prevent the inevitable collision.

The old man had watched him approaching, had watched him walking with his eyes to the ground, looking at the leaves that had fallen from each tree, immersed in the games of his thoughts. And now, having prevented the collision, he was stroking Bruno's jacket with rather comical gestures as if he was ironing it after having rumpled it.

Bruno felt absurdly as if he had been caught red handed, especially when, looking beyond the thin Chinese man, he saw he was not alone. A variegated group of about fifteen people of both sexes was watching the scene. No one was speaking. Then it dawned on him that, when he had bumped into the old man, he had interrupted a group exercise, no doubt some sort of oriental discipline.

He mumbled a clumsy apology. The old man, looking him steadily in the eye with a strange smile of complicity, squeezed him gently with both hands on his waist. Bruno thought they must look like dance partners and felt even more ridiculous. Then the old man let go, still without lowering his gaze or losing his strange smile in which Bruno was unsure if he detected a hint of mischief and tension, though this might have been due to his own embarrassment. When he was at last free of his hands, he walked off in a semicircle until he stood behind the group, who

after watching the strange encounter in silence, now turned their attention back to the old man, oblivious to his presence.

Facing both the group and Bruno, the old Asian began to move in a slow coordinated manner. His arms and legs flowed with remarkable elegance. The rest of the group imitated him in a slow dance without music, accompanied only by the soft sound of their feet brushing the earth, their arms drawing curves in the air, and their breathing.

He was reminded of someone he knew, a friend who practised tai chi. For a moment he searched for him among the group, but though they had their backs to him, he knew he wasn't there. How silly of him; his friend would be working.

No instructions were given and no one spoke. In the clearing surrounded by trees, the ground carpeted with coloured circles of leaves, the old man moved in a harmonious dance and a second later his companions began to imitate him like an immediate and multiple echo. A slow ballet transmitting tranquillity was being performed In front of Bruno. As everyone had their eyes on the old man, Bruno was able to watch them from behind without feeling uncomfortable. The old man, however, while never ceasing in his movements, still gave him penetrating looks. Bruno could not work out the feelings behind them. He felt watched, but due to some strange affinity he felt in the old man's gaze, not uncomfortable.

Ten minutes passed. Then, after a last movement that Bruno interpreted as one of final retreat, they were still. The group broke up into small huddles, talking quietly. Some of them, including the old man, went over to a bench to collect their coats. Bruno had decided to leave, and had even taken a step in the direction in which he had been going, when he looked over at the old man, who, as if expecting his look, beckoned to him.

It was one of those seemingly unexceptionable moments when, moved by strange internal impulses, people find ways to communicate without the need for words. Later, when he remembered this moment, Bruno would say he had known the

