Camacho's Wedding Feast

ALBERTO GERCHUNOFF (1884–1950)
Translated from the Spanish by Prudencio de Pereda

Set at the turn of the century in Rajíl, a shtetl-like agricultural town in La Pampa, t lyrical story, first published as part of The Jewish Gauchos *(1910) and among the b in the volume, evokes the often explosive relationship between gentiles and Jews in Southern Hemisphere. It fuses the universal theme of the stolen bride with a narrat voice and incident borrowed from* Don Quixote. *Through the tale's folkloristic to which finds pleasure in describing the details of pastoral life as well as Jewish rituals a tradition, the Russian-born author, considered the grandfather of Jewish Latin Am ican literature, advances his ill-fated view of Argentina as the true Promised Land.*

FOR TWO WEEKS now, the people of the entire district had been exp tantly waiting for Pascual Liske's wedding day. Pascual was the *rich* Liske's s The family lived in Espindola and, naturally enough, the respectable people the colonies were looking forward to the ceremony and feast. To judge by t early signs, the feast was to be exceptional. It was well-known in Rajíl that t groom's family had purchased eight demijohns of wine, a barrel of beer, a numerous bottles of soft drinks. Kelner's wife had discovered this when s happened to come on the Liskes' cart, stopped near the breakwater. The re had broken, and the Liskes' hired man was working frantically to replace the

"The soft drinks were *rose* colored," she told the neighbors. "Yes!" she sa looking directly at the doubting *shochet*'s wife.* "Yes, they were rose color and each bottle had a waxen seal on it."

* A shochet is a ritual slaughterer—Ed.

Everyone agreed old man Liske's fortune could stand that kind of spending.

In addition to the original land and oxen that he'd gotten from the administration, Liske had many cows and horses. Last year's harvest alone had brought him thousands of pesos, and he could well afford to marry off his son in style without touching his principal.

Everyone further agreed that the bride deserved this kind of a wedding. Raquel was one of the most beautiful girls in the district, if not in the whole world. She was tall, with straw-blond hair so fine and full it suggested mist; her eyes were so blue they made one's breath catch. She was tall and lithe, but her simple print dresses showed the full curving loveliness of a beautiful body. An air of shyness and a certain peevishness became her because they seemed to protect her loveliness.

Many of the colonists had tried to win her—the haughty young clerk of the administration as well as all the young men in Villaguay and thereabouts, but none had achieved a sympathetic response. Pascual Liske had been the most persistent of these suitors, but certainly not the most favored, at first. In spite of his perseverance and his gifts, Raquel did not like him. She felt depressed and bored because Pascual never spoke of anything but seedlings, livestock, and harvests. The only young man she had seemed to favor was a young admirer from the San Gregorio colony, Gabriel Camacho. She had gone out dancing with him during the many times he used to come to visit.

Her family had insisted she accept Pascual and the marriage had been arranged.

On the day of the feast, the invited families had gathered at the breakwater before Espindola. A long line of carts, crowded with men and women, was pointed toward the colony. It was a spring afternoon, and the flowering country looked beautiful in the lowering rays of the sun. Young men rode up and down the line on their spirited ponies, calling and signaling to the girls when the mothers were looking elsewhere. In their efforts to catch a girl's eye, they set their ponies to capering in true gaucho style. In their eagerness, some even proposed races and other contests.

Russian and Jewish songs were being sung in all parts of the caravan, the voices fresh and happy. At other points, the songs of this, their new country, could be heard being sung in a language that few understood.

At last, the caravan moved into the village. The long line of heavy carts, being gently pulled by the oxen, had the look of a primitive procession. The carts stopped at different houses, and the visitors went inside to finish their preparations. Then, at the appointed time, all the invited guests came out together and began to make their way to the groom's house.

Arriving at Liskes', they found that rumors of the fabulous preparations had not been exaggerated. A wide pavilion stood facing the house with decorative lanterns hanging inside on high poles, masked by flowered branches. Under the canvas roof were long tables covered with white cloths and countless covered dishes and bowls that the flies buzzed about hopelessly. Old Liske wore his black velvet frock coat—a relic of his prosperous years in Bessarabia—as well as a newly added silk scarf of yellow, streaked with blue. With hands in his pockets, he moved from group to group, being consciously pleasant to everyone and speaking quite freely of the ostentation and unusual luxury of the feast. To minimize the importance of it all, he would mention the price, in a lowered voice, and then, as if to explain his part in this madness, would shrug his shoulders, saying, "After all, he's my only son."

The Hebrew words *ben yachid* ("only son") express this sentiment very well, and they were heard frequently as many guests expressed their praises of the fat Pascual. Even his bumpkin qualities were cited as assets in the extraordinary rash of praise.

His mother was dressed in a showy frock with winged sleeves and wore a green kerchief spread over her full shoulders. Moving quickly, in spite of her ample roundness, she went from place to place, talking and nodding to everyone in the growing crowd, which was soon becoming as big and fantastic as the fiesta.

Under the side eave of the house, a huge caldron filled with chickens simmered over a fire, while at the side, in the deeper shadow, hung a row of dripping roasted geese. In front of these were trays with the traditional stuffed fish stacked for cooling. What the guests admired more than the chicken-filled caldron, the roast geese, stuffed fish, and the calf's ribs that the cooks were preparing were the demijohns of wine, the huge cask of beer, and, above all else, the bottles of soft drinks whose roseate color the sun played on. Yes, it was so. Just as they'd heard in Rajil, there were the bottles of rose-colored soft drinks with red seals on the bottles.

The music was supplied by an accordion and guitar, and the two musicians

were already essaying some popular Jewish pieces. Voices in the crowd were tentatively humming along with them.

The bride was preparing for the ceremony in the house next to Liske's. Friends were dressing her, and her crown of sugar was already well smudged from constant rearrangement. Raquel was very sad. No matter how much the other girls reminded her of her wonderful luck—to marry a man like Pascual wasn't something that happened every day—she remained depressed. She was silent most of the time and answered with sighs or short nods. She was a normally shy girl, but today she seemed truly sad. Those eyes that were usually so wide and clear now seemed as clouded as her forehead.

In talking about the guests, someone told Raquel that Gabriel had come with other people from San Gregorio. She grew more depressed at hearing his name and, as she put on the bridal veil, two big tears ran down her cheeks and fell on her satin blouse.

Everyone knew the cause of her weeping. Raquel and Gabriel had come to an understanding months ago, and Jacobo—that wily little know-it-all—had claimed he saw them kissing in the shadow of a paradise tree on the eve of the Day of Atonement.

Pascual's mother finally arrived at the bride's house and, in accordance with custom, congratulated the bride and kissed her noisily. Her voice screeched as she called to let the ceremony begin. Raquel said nothing. She shrugged in despair and stood hopelessly while the group of friends gathered at her back and picked up her lace-bordered train. The future father-in-law arrived with the rabbi and the procession started.

Outside Liske's house, the guests were gathered about the tables, while inside the house Pascual, who was dressed in black, waited with friends and the father of the bride. When they heard the hand clapping outside, they went out to the grounds and the ceremony began.

Pascual walked over to the canopy, held up by couples of young men and women, and stood under it. He was joined immediately by his betrothed, who came escorted by the two sponsors. Rabbi Nisen began the blessings and offered the ritual cup to the bride and groom. Then the bride began her seven turns around the man, accompanied by the sponsors. As she finished, an old lady called out that there had only been six, and another turn was made. The rabbi read the marriage contract, which conformed entirely with the sacred laws of Israel. He sang the nuptial prayers again. The ceremony

ended with the symbolic breaking of the cup. An old man placed it on the ground, and Pascual stepped on it with force enough to break a rock.

The crowd pressed in to congratulate the couple. Her friends gathered around the bride, embracing and kissing her, but Raquel was still depressed. She accepted the congratulations and good wishes in silence. Other guests gathered around the long table and began to toast and drink.

Old Liske proposed some dancing before they sat down to supper, and he himself began by moving into the first steps of the characteristic Jewish piece, "the happy dance," to the accompaniment of the accordion and guitar. At the head of the long table, the bride and groom stood together and watched the growing bustle without saying a word to each other. Facing them, standing very erect and pale, was Gabriel.

The guests called for the bride and groom to dance. Pascual frowned anxiously and shook his head. He did not dance. The calls and applause receded, and everyone stood waiting in embarrassment. Gabriel stepped forward suddenly and offered his arm to the bride. The accordion and guitar began a popular Jewish polka.

Gabriel tried to outdo himself, and he was a superb dancer. At one point he said something to Raquel, and she looked at him in surprise and grew still paler. People were beginning to whisper and move away. Israel Kelner had taken the arm of the shochet as they both stepped away from the watching circle.

"Gabriel shouldn't have done this," Kelner said. "Everybody knows that he's in love with Raquel and that she's *not* in love with her husband."

The shochet pulled at his beard and smiled. "I don't want to offend anyone," he said. "I'm a friend of Liske's and he's a religious man—but Pascual is a beast. Did you see how mixed up he got when he was repeating the *hareiad* pledge during the ceremony? Believe me, Rabbi Israel, I feel sorry for the girl. She's so beautiful and fine . . ."

Little Jacobo took Rebecca aside and talked to her in Argentine criollo—he was the most gaucho of the Jews, as demonstrated now by his complete gaucho dress. "Listen, *negrita*," he began. "Something's going to happen here."

"A fight?" Rebecca whispered with interest.

"Just what I'm telling you. I was in San Gregorio this morning. Met Gabriel there. He asked me if I was going to the wedding—this one, of course. I said yes, I was, and he asked me about doing something later . . ."

"A race?" Rebecca interrupted. "You mean to say that you made a bet with Gabriel? Oh, you men! And they said that he was heartbroken!"

"Oh, well," Jacobo said. He shrugged his shoulders. "As they say: Men run to races . . ."

As night began to fall, the paper lanterns were lit, and many guests walked off a distance to see the effect of the lights. It was a special privilege of the rich to have such lights, and the last time they'd been seen here was during the visit of Colonel Goldschmith, a representative of the European Jewish Committee.

The next item was dinner, a banquet that bars description. The guests were seated and the bride and groom served the "golden broth," the consecrative dish of the newlyweds. Then the platters of chicken, duck, and fish began to circulate; and the wine was poured to a complete and unanimous chorus of praise directed to the hostess.

"I've never eaten such tasty stuffed fish."

"Where could you ever get such roast geese as this?" the shochet asked.

Rabbi Moises Ornstein delivered the eulogy and added: "I must say that no one cooks as well as Madam Liske. Whoever tastes her dishes knows that they are a superior person's."

Fritters of meat and rice, wrapped in vine leaves, were served next, while more beer and wine quickened the spirits of the guests. The bride excused herself, saying that she had to change her dress. She left the party accompanied by her friends. Her mother-in-law had started to go with them, but Jacobo stopped her. "Madam Liske!" he said. "Sit down and listen to your praises. Sit down and hear what we think of this wonderful banquet. We'll be mad if you leave," he said, when she seemed reluctant to stop. "We're enjoying ourselves very much and we want to share this with you."

"Let me go, my boy," she said. "I have to help my daughter-in-law."

"Rebecca will help her. Sit down. Sit down. Rebecca!" Jacobo turned to shout. "Go and help the bride!"

The old lady sat down—everyone about had joined in the urging—and Jacobo brought her a glass of wine so that they could drink a toast.

"When one has a son like yours," the shochet said to Madam Liske, "one should be glad."

The toasts were offered and drunk, and this clinking of glasses, lusty singing, and music could be heard over all the grounds. The sky was full of stars, the atmosphere lightly tinged with clover and the scent of hay. In the nearby pasture, the cows mooed and the light wind stirred the leaves. Jacobo got up and excused himself.

"I have to see about my pony," he explained. "I think he might need a blanket."

"I'll look after my mare," Gabriel said, as he stood up to go with him. They moved away from the group, and Jacobo took Gabriel's arm. "Listen, the bay is saddled and waiting by the palisade," he said. "The *boyero*'s kid is watching him and the gate is open. At the first turn there's a sulky all set. The Lame One is watching there. Tell me, have you got a gun?"

Gabriel did not seem to hear this last point. He patted Jacobo's arm and started to walk toward the palisade. After a few steps, he turned to look back. "And how will Raquel get away from the girls in there?"

"Don't worry about that. Rebecca's there."

When the girls who were with the bride did return to the party, Madam Liske asked for her daughter-in-law. "She's coming right away with Rebecca," they told her. Then Rebecca returned alone and gave the old lady still another excuse. Jacobo was doing his best to distract Madam Liske with toasts. Others took it up, and there was a great clinking of glasses and mumblings of toasts.

The musicians continued to play and the guests to eat and drink. The jugs of wine were being refilled continuously, and no one's glass was ever low. Pascual, the groom, looked fat and solemn and said nothing. From time to time, he would dart a quick look at the bride's empty chair. The gallop of a horse was heard at that moment, and then, soon after, the sounds of a sulky starting off.

Jacobo whispered into Rebecca's ear: "That's them, isn't it?"

"Yes," the girl whispered back, "they were leaving when I came away."

The continued absence of the bride was worrying her mother-in-law and, without saying anything, she slipped into the house to see. She came out immediately.

"Rebecca, have you seen Raquel?" she said.

"I left her in the house, Señora. Isn't she there?"

"She's not."

"That's funny . . ."

The old lady spoke to her husband and to her son, Pascual. The guests

were beginning to whisper among themselves. They saw that something had gone wrong. The accordion and guitar went silent. The guests began to stand up; some glasses were tipped over, but no one paid any attention. A few of the guests moved toward the house. Others asked: "Is it the bride? Has something happened to the bride?"

The shochet of Rajíl asked his friend and counterpart from Karmel about the point of sacred law, if it was true that the bride had fled.

"Do you think she has?" the shochet of Karmel asked.

"It's possible. Anything is possible in these situations."

"Well, I think that divorce would be the next step. The girl would be free, as would be her husband. It's the common course."

Meanwhile, the excitement was growing all around them. Old Liske grabbed the gaucho's little son. "Did you see anything out there? Out there on the road?" he said.

"Yes. Out there, on the road to San Gregorio. I saw a sulky, with Gabriel—he was driving it—and there was a girl sitting with him."

"He's kidnapped her!" Madam Liske screamed. Her voice was close to hysteria. "Kidnapped her!"

Shouts and quick talking started all over the grounds now. Most of the crowd was genuinely shocked and surprised. When old Liske turned to abuse the father of the gaucho boy, the man stood up to him, and they were soon wrestling and rolling in the center of pushing and shouting guests. The table was overturned, and spilled wine and broken glass added to the excitement.

The shochet of Rajíl mounted a chair and shouted for order. What had happened was a disgrace, he said, a punishment from God, but fighting and shouting would not ease it any.

"She's an adulteress!" shouted the enraged Liske, as he sought to break out of restraining hands. "An infamous adulteress!"

"She is not!" the shochet answered him. "She would be," he said, "if she had left her husband 'after one day, at least, after the marriage,' as our law so clearly says it. This is the law of God, you know, and there is no other way but that they be divorced. Pascual is a fine, honorable young man, but if she doesn't love him, she can't be made to live under his roof."

The shochet went on in his usually eloquent and wise way, and he cited similar cases acknowledged by the most illustrious rabbis and scholars. In

Jerusalem, the sacred capital, there had occurred a similar case, and Rabbi Hillel had declared in favor of the girl. At the end, the shochet turned to Pascual: "In the name of our laws, Pascual, I ask that you grant a divorce to Raquel and that you declare, here and now, that you accept it for yourself." Pascual scratched his head and looked sad. Then, in a tearful voice, he accepted the shochet's proposal.

The crowd grew quiet and the guests soon began to leave, one by one, some murmuring, some hiding a smile.

Well, as you can see, my patient readers, there are fierce, arrogant gauchos, wife stealers, and Camachos, as well as the most learned and honorable of rabbinical scholars, in the little Jewish colony where I learned to love the Argentine sky and felt a part of its wonderful earth. This story I've told—with more detail than art—is a true one, just as I'm sure the original story of Camacho's feast is true. May I die this instant if I've dared to add the slightest bit of invention to the marvelous story.

I'd like very much to add some verses—as was done to the original Camacho story—but God has denied me that talent. I gave you the tale in its purest truth, and if you want couplets, add them yourself in your most gracious style. Don't forget *my* name, however—just as our gracious Master Don Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra remembered the name of Cide Hamete Benegeli and gave him all due credit for the original Camacho story.

And if the exact, accurate telling of this tale has pleased you, don't send me any golden doubloons—here, they don't even buy bread and water. Send me some golden drachmas or, if not, I'd appreciate a carafe of Jerusalem wine from the vineyards my ancestors planted as they sang the praises of Jehovah. May He grant you wealth and health, the gifts I ask for myself.

The Closed Coffin

MARCELO BIRMAJER (b. 1966)
Translated from the Spanish by Sharon Wood

In literary terms, Marcelo Birmajer sees himself as a descendant of Isaac Bashevis Singer. His work re-creates life in El Once, the Jewish neighborhood in Buenos Aires. He is the author of Three Musketeers, *among other novels. He also wrote the screenplay to Daniel Burman's movie* Lost Embrace, *released in 2004. "The Closed Coffin" is a vivid tale of friendship and intrigue.*

I'D SPENT THE whole day trying to do this review. I intended to read the book early in the morning and write my comments in the afternoon. But I'd only managed to finish reading just as the evening light was fading, and that was only by skipping numerous pages.

I pride myself on being a reviewer who actually reads the whole of the books he is writing about: if the book is such hard going that I have to deviate from this principle, I don't review it and that's that.

I couldn't entirely blame the author for the fact that the book couldn't be read in one shot. Over the last few months I'd been developing a sort of symbolic affliction: it was harder to read when I was being paid for it.

This book in particular wasn't bad, but you could see the author had let a short story run away with him and it had turned into something else. The publishers had seen fit to publish it as a short novel. Actually the story wasn't so much a long short story as a long drawn-out one, and you could see the difference between those two things in the last part of the tale. It was called *The Lady of Osmany*, and it was about a widow who went to the police because, over a period of several days, she had heard the sound of violent

hammering coming again and again from the apartment below in the middle of the night. The incident was part of a police drama of murder, mystery, and maybe ghosts.

Recently I had only been able to sit myself down to read a book with a critical and productive mind when my son had gone to sleep, around twelve o'clock at night. And I still had to wait another half an hour for my wife to take off her makeup and go to bed before I could type the first letters with no fear of any sudden noises interrupting me.

But, as if we were living in a fantasy story, shortly before one o'clock, someone, somewhere in the building, presumably just below me, started shifting furniture around. You could hear the sound of it being dragged, of chairs falling over, even a few blows with a hammer. Maybe someone was moving, or cleaning up at an odd time (when we are awake we always forget that other people are sleeping). Or maybe a neighbor was being robbed and murdered. Whatever it was, I couldn't write with that racket going on. The benign influence bestowed by the early hours of the morning on anybody who was prepared to forgo hours of sleep in order to finish off his labors was being eroded by this unplanned cacophony of sound.

I switched off the computer, picked up a notebook and pen, and whispered to my sleeping wife that I was going to a bar to finish my work. She answered with an alarmed murmur, as if she were replying to one of the creatures that populated her dreams.

Just in case, I tore off a sheet from my notebook, wrote down the same message, and left it next to the door.

Since I got married, I don't usually go out at that time of night, and certainly not to go to a bar. But I had no choice: my deadline for the review was the following afternoon, I had lots of things to do the next morning, and with all that noise I couldn't write.

Before my marriage I would sometimes go out during the early hours of the morning. I suffered anxiety attacks that I could only control by getting out of my house and finding a place where I could watch other faces, cars, or any movement that was more or less normal. Thanks to God, marriage and fatherhood had turned me into a tranquil man once again.

I crossed through the streets of the part of town where we lived and headed for a bar open 24/7 on Agüero and Rivadia. Strangely enough, I didn't feel the heavy melancholy that might have gone hand in hand with

the recollection of a habit from a previous age in which I had been a lonely and sometimes tormented man. I felt only the sweet euphoria of the married man, happy to recall the vestiges of freedom that he no longer imagined possible. I chose a large can of beer, a bag of salty snacks, and sat down behind a trio of teenage girls. Their chatting didn't distract me: on the contrary, I began to work eagerly, and looking at them filled the necessary pauses before correcting a paragraph or starting another one. I was so pleased that I treated the book better than it deserved. The beer helped.

Then a man came up to my table, smiling.

He stretched out his hand.

For a moment I thought, "He's the author."

Along with the bangs coming from the apartment below mine, this coincidence could have changed the natural course of my life. But a moment later I realized that the book had lain for the whole time with its front cover facing down on the table and that, from where this man had been sitting, it would have been impossible for him to see what book I was reading.

The man said my name and asked if it was me.

I looked at him, astonished, and finally I exclaimed: "Pancho!"

It was Pancho Perlman.

He was still smiling. I don't know exactly how fat he was, but his face looked as though it was about to burst. It was blown up so much it made his eyes look slanted. He must have been about three or four years older than I was. (I worked it out as if it were his face, and not our actual dates of birth, that marked the distance of time between us.)

The name itself was hardly a difficult one to remember. After all, there aren't many Jews nicknamed Pancho or called Francisco, and he was the only one in the Jewish club where we had met.

But there are details that erase all other traces. Pancho Perlman's father had killed himself when he was a child. And when I was a child too.

I don't know why, but I had gone to the vigil. The Jewish vigil, with the coffin closed. I remembered a cream-colored cloth with the Star of David embroidered in the center of it covering the coffin. I also remembered that the cloth had a cigarette burn on one of the corners, and this had seemed to me to signal the fact that the man had taken his own life.

I didn't ask my parents about this, but for years I remained silently convinced that, when a Jew commits suicide, besides burying him against the cemetery wall they would make a cigarette burn on one of the corners of the cloth with the Star of David on it covering the coffin.

I think I only freed myself of this heretical way of thinking—if I really freed myself of it—when I had to go to the dreadful vigil of a friend who had killed himself in the flower of youth, in the flower of his success, and in the flower of his life in general. I never knew why he killed himself.

I wasn't sure why Pancho Perlman's father had killed himself, either.

I invited Pancho to sit down at my table and began the task of working out how to tell him that I had to hand in a piece of work the following day. Yes, we hadn't seen each other for twenty years; yes, I had been at his dead father's vigil (or *suicided* father, which sounds weird); yes, we had a whole life to tell each other about, and fate had brought us together like an old married couple. But, I had to explain to him, my family needed me to earn money and I had to finish my work.

"Those of us who don't commit suicide, Pancho," I thought with a cruelty that frightened me, "have to get on with things."

"I read everything you write," he said. "You are one of the few journalists I find interesting."

"Thank you," I said. "I do what I can."

"I'm going to get a coffee," he said.

"Look . . ." I began.

But Pancho was already on his way to the counter. He came back with a coffee in his hand.

"They don't let you write everything you want, right?"

"Not at all," I said. "But I have to finish a review now."

"Right now?" he said, disbelieving.

"Right now," I confirmed. "And what about you, what are you doing here?"

Pancho took his time answering.

Finally, unsure as to whether he should open himself up to me or not, he replied: "There are some nights when I can't stand being on my own in the house."

This confession defeated me. I could insist that I had to work, but I no longer had the will to seriously suggest to Pancho that we put off our meeting for another day.

"Did you get married?" he asked.

"I have a son," I said.

Pancho had left the coffee on my table but still hadn't felt sufficiently invited.

"Sit down," I capitulated. "What about you?"

Pancho squeezed his body in between the bench and the Formica table as best he could. A blue shirt, thrust into his pants, pressed against his belly. He wore blue jeans that were frayed at various strange points and suede shoes with no shoelaces.

He hesitated too before answering my question.

"Mine's quite a story," he said. "I married twice and I had two children with the worse one."

"How old are they?"

"Seven and nine," he said. "But my ex-wife doesn't let me see them."

In the silence that followed his dramatic revelation, I decided I would listen to Pancho for however long he wanted and only afterward, whatever time it was, would I finish my piece. I'd get back home just in time to put it on the computer and sleep a few hours before going to my first appointment tomorrow morning. I needed strong coffee.

"I'm going to get a coffee," I told him.

Pancho nodded. A smile of extraordinary happiness spread over his face. It was the serenity of the lone, tormented man who, in the early hours of the morning, had found someone to talk to.

I walked over to the counter thinking about Pancho's simplicity. Sancho Perlman, he should be called. All his life he had been a transparent man. His feelings, his desires, were written all over him even before he could express them himself. With his slightly twisted face, his gestures were even clearer.

Passions and pains did not come to the surface so easily in my family. Each member of my family possessed a fixed expression that bore little relationship to real experience and ran the gamut from sadness to joy, depending on who was standing in front of them. Words came later. And beneath them, without ever being made public either for ourselves or for others, our tragedies and joys. Nobody is sufficiently intelligent to know his own feelings, and my family would never have permitted itself to say something that was not intelligent or about which it didn't know at least 75 percent.

The Perlmans were not necessarily poorer than we were, but they were certainly more vulgar and less educated. The dish they most aspired to was steak and fries, and their classic dessert was crème caramel. They thought we were strange because we liked fish that wasn't simply cod fillet. Betty Perlman dressed very badly, but she tried to swap clothes with my mother. This meant that my mother lent clothes to Betty and, just once in a blue moon, accepted something from her that was always left hanging in the closet and deliberately wrinkled, so Betty wouldn't realize that my mother hadn't actually put it on. Natalio Perlman was more of a practicing Jew than my father, but he knew much less about Jewish culture in general.

My family wasn't especially sophisticated, and we easily fit into the middle class. The Perlmans, however, were squeezed in with the barely definable segment of people whose basic needs have been met but who have no interest in any other kind of need. The Italian grotesque and the Jewish sense of overwhelming bewilderment came to mind with their open mouths when they ate, their clichés and commonplaces when they spoke, and their general lack of interest in the world.

And yet . . . and yet . . . the Perlmans laughed. Not the maniacal laugh of my father or the polite laugh of my mother. They laughed unselfconsciously. They laughed at silly jokes or something that had happened to any one of them. Natalio and Betty Perlman kissed each other. They would go on trips and leave the two children with their grandparents. At times the Perlmans, Betty and Natalio, would scream bloody murder at each other in front of us, and my mother would say to me: "You see, they're all lovey-dovey but really they hate each other."

I never dared to answer her: "No, they don't hate each other. Human couples also yell at each other and get angry at each other. Hatred is what's between you and my father, who never kiss and never yell."

But I had no right; nor did I know enough about couples, whether my father and my mother or Betty and Natalio.

And today I still don't know much about my relationship with my wife; nor did I think Pancho knew why, exactly, he had separated from his wife or why she didn't let him see his children.

"Why did you split up?" I asked him, coming back with my coffee.

"Do you know about the Lubavitch?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "They even get mentioned in one of my stories."

The Lubavitch were a sort of Jewish "order," with their Orthodox ideas and reformist methods: they used vans with loudspeakers, they organized activities, and they tried to spot who was Jewish in order to offer them a prayer.

"Now you can put them in another story too," said Pancho. "My wife became a Lubavitch. I was always strongly Jewish; in my house we observed all the holidays. But my wife really overdid it. She cut her hair, she wore the skirt, she threatened to let the boys' side-locks grow. Can you believe it? I couldn't stand her. I'm a Jew to my bones, but I also have my traditions and my way of doing things. Now the Lubavitch are telling my wife not to let me see my children."

I was about to say, "What do your parents say to all this?" when I remembered that Natalio Perlman could no longer be counted among the living.

"What about your mother?" I asked.

"She's a wreck," he told me. "She says she doesn't want to live anymore. I'm trying to reach some kind of agreement with my ex-wife, to let my mother see them once a week."

"How often do you see them?"

"Whenever I can," said Pancho.

And he drained the cold coffee still left at the bottom of the plastic cup.

Pancho Perlman, the simple man, wasn't that simple after all. And yet despite it all, he still was. All families, everybody, suffered tragedies throughout their lives: accidents, terrible quarrels, or, as in this case, divorce. What differentiated the simple from the sophisticated was their attitude in the face of each cataclysmic event. Pancho Perlman hadn't taken his neo-Lubavitch wife to marriage counseling. Nor had his wife tried to overcome her frustration with macrobiotic food and yoga. At the first hurdle within her psyche, or her marriage, or whatever it was that was coming apart, Pancho Perlman's wife had cut straight to the chase, gone back to the shtetl, to the pious customs of her forefathers.

And divorce—no dialogue, no calm exchange. Passion and hatred: I never want to see you again, and don't even think about seeing your children ever again.

It was no way to resolve things, and yet it's true that there is, indeed, no way to resolve things. Pancho Perlman and his wife simply knew this before many others did. I just implored my wife not to walk out on me, to be able to stay in my home until my son reached his thirtieth birthday. This was all I needed to keep within the limits of what I thought of as normality.

The only suggestion I could think of for Pancho was to become more observant and, in that way, try to win back his ex-wife. But I didn't dare say it. Anyway, he had gotten married again, while I was beginning to feel a bit hungry and a ham-and-cheese sandwich on wheat bread was clamoring to jump into the microwave. This wasn't the best moment to urge anybody to go back along the path of our ancestors.

I got up to get the sandwich as Pancho was telling me about his new wife, a mulatto from Ecuador.

The book about Señora Osmany seemed like a splendid novella to me now, discreet, appealing, and I could find no fault in its plot development or its length. The beeping of the microwave seemed to be counting the years of my life: I thought about how many good books had missed the chance for a good review just because the critic hadn't taken a few hours more in the early morning and hadn't bumped into Pancho Perlman.

"That would be all right," I thought to myself, "steak and fries, crème caramel, a mulatto from Ecuador."

In his own way, Pancho Perlman had followed the family pattern. And I continued to admire his simplicity. But . . . why had Don Natalio Perlman committed suicide? I've already said—I don't know. Nobody knows why people commit suicide. Neither do we know why we want to live. But committing suicide is strange, while wanting to live is normal.

Natalio Perlman was a normal man. His food was normal, his behavior was normal, his love for his wife and children was normal. It was even normal for him to go to bed with the cleaning lady, the so-called shiksa.

Mary was from Paraguay, and hardly exuberant. She had a decent pair of breasts, and in the club we talked about her along with all the other shiksas. But her breasts weren't much bigger than Betty's, and she wasn't that young anymore either.

Why had this wholly predictable event derailed into tragedy?

Many husbands like Perlman had affairs with either their own servants, a friend's servant, or a Madame X. The most that usually happened was that the servant was sacked, or sent packing, or maybe there was a proper separation. But a suicide?

According to some people, Mary was pregnant. How would I know? It was also rumored that Natalio lost his head over this woman and that she

had a husband in Paraguay. My parents didn't believe either of these versions. In my house indulging in gossip or spreading it around was looked down upon. How relieved my parents must have felt when they witnessed the utter failure of simple people!

That's what happens, I could hear my mother say, to those who sneak a kiss at the door, to those who laugh inadvertently, to those who spread gossip, to those who exhaust themselves amid shouts and crazily make up again. That's what happens.

A whole life of constraint, of repressed passions, of measured-out sex was at last rewarded with an indisputable prize: we, darling, do not kill ourselves.

And yet . . . and yet . . . In my family there was a suicide. My mother's brother, no less. At the age of nineteen, my uncle Israel had committed suicide. It was in 1967, and I had just turned one.

The difference between simple families and sophisticated ones in the face of tragedy! I first learned of the existence of my uncle Israel when I was fifteen years old. I mean, in the same moment I learned that he had existed, that he was nineteen years old, and that he had killed himself. As if it were an adoption, my grandmother had guarded the secret of her son's suicide. But her son wasn't adopted; he was dead.

My cousins were told he had died in the Six-Day War. When I was an adult, some ten years after learning of the existence and death of my uncle, the memory of his name sent a shudder down my spine. He had the same name as the Jews' own country, which had been about to disappear at the time my uncle killed himself. The Jews succeeded in defending themselves and their country, but my uncle failed to defeat his inner demons. Just as my young friend failed, and Natalio Perlman too.

And why had my uncle committed suicide? I don't know. Nobody knows.

When my mother ran out of other options she told me some story about psychosis. But this was all very obscure: he'd been a normal boy until he killed himself.

My uncle had been present at my birth and at my circumcision. He had held me in his arms, yet I knew nothing of him until I was fifteen. That's how sophisticated families dealt with tragedy.

The simple Perlman family had wept over Natalio's coffin, they had invited friends and acquaintances to the ritual of tragedy, they had buried him in the Tablada Cemetery—an intimate ceremony with just Betty, the boys, and the grandparents. Jewish tradition exacts a penalty for suicide, and those who die by their own hand are buried against a distant wall and visited only by close family. But everyone around knew he had killed himself.

Gunshot? Poison? I couldn't remember. And I wasn't going to ask Pancho at two o'clock in the morning. My uncle, I knew, had put a shotgun in his mouth, sitting out on a terrace, after being a normal boy for nineteen years.

The sandwich had made me sleepy and I had to go and get another coffee.

When I came back I wanted Pancho to go so I could get back to work. Instead, I heard myself ask, "How was it your father killed himself?"

How could I have asked that? Had I gone crazy? Was this how the scions of sophisticated families behaved? Was this how I followed the family path of rigor and restraint? What happened to the man I was, the man who knew that telling the truth resolved nothing and so the best thing was to talk about trivia and not bother anybody?

Pancho seemed to be looking at me, I thought, as if a dozen questions were going through his head. Is this guy crazy? Is he asking how my father killed himself, or why? And *the way* he asked: Is that coldness in the face of tragedy or compulsion to question an enigma that weighed down on his whole childhood?

I could have answered yes to all of them.

Could there still be a tiny drop of coffee left in his cup? Why was he raising the shapeless white plastic to his lips?

Whatever was still in the cup—damp sugar granules or just emptiness—Pancho drank it.

He looked at the clock hanging on the wall—ten past two—he looked at the three adolescent girls—one of them had fallen asleep—and he said: "My father didn't kill himself."

There followed a dialogue in which all my retentive capacities were overwhelmed. I didn't know if I was asking what I wanted to ask. I didn't know what I wanted to keep quiet about or what to say. I didn't know what I wanted to know. I was sure, and I think from that moment onward I will always be sure that, whatever I knew, it would not be the truth.

"Was he killed?" I asked.

"No. He's still alive."

The closed coffin, the cloth with a burn in one corner, the tears of a simple family—all a fraud.

Natalio Perlman had run away with the shiksa. Betty Perlman couldn't accept this and told everyone he was dead. She had held a vigil for him in her house. She had made the whole town believe he'd killed himself.

Her father, mother, and in-laws had permitted her to say Natalio was dead. They had driven in the vigil cars, I don't know where to, and then come back again. The children had been told the truth: that he had run away with Mary. But for the rest of the world, Natalio, his father, had killed himself.

I saw Pancho for a few years after the death of his father. If I remember rightly, the last time was just after my bar mitzvah.

I don't know if, after that, he managed to keep the secret the way he did with me. And I didn't ask him then, at two-thirty in the morning.

I imagine he told his wife and children the truth. And I imagine that telling them the truth made no difference at all. There are few affections of the soul that can be communicated. Would he really have told his wife and children the truth? What for?

Wasn't it better to let them believe that their grandfather and father-in-law was dead rather than recounting the unrecountable tale of a woman who falsely grieved for her runaway husband?

In my mind's eye I saw the mark on the edge of the cloth, and I felt a wave of nausea. I got up and ran to the restroom. But as I looked at myself in the mirror, instead of vomiting, I understood: the mark in the corner of the cloth wasn't a mark of suicide—it was there to tip off the insiders that the coffin was empty.

"Don't worry, boys, the coffin's empty. This is all a farce."

I went back to my table, mentally talking to my mother. "You see, Mother? People who sneak a kiss at the door, who laugh and yell, not only do they not commit suicide, they don't die at all."

"That shocked you, didn't it?" asked Pancho.

I nodded.

"How could you keep that a secret?" I asked him.

He shrugged.

"But I suppose my grandmother managed to wipe out the existence of her son, as far as I was concerned at least, for fifteen years."

"He's in Argentina now," he told me.

"Who?" I asked.

"My father. Natalio."

I looked to see if there was anything else to eat or drink, but nothing appealed to me.

"The Paraguayan woman left him, probably about ten years ago now. They didn't even get to Paraguay; he found out she was married. Or that she had a man at least. My father ended up subsidizing their marriage. The other one was the lover, and my father was the cuckolded husband."

"Did he come back recently?"

"It was to try and make things up to my mother. He let her go on saying he was dead. Besides, my grandparents never forgave him for running off with a non-Jewish woman."

"Why did they let me go to the vigil?" I asked.

"We never knew how you ended up there."

"I think I came to see you," I said, "and suddenly I found . . . found . . ."

"No," said Pancho, "that can't be right."

"Who knows," I said. "We were very young."

Like a hologram hovering in the air, the image of Pancho standing next to me popped into my head, both of us with short pants, trying to work out how to be children, Jewish children, in the Once district in a gentile country. Now we were trying to work out how to be adults.

I looked all around me.

"Have you seen him?" I asked.

"I haven't seen him for two months," he told me. "He's not too good." And he added, with a hidden coherence: "Now that my mom can't see her grandchildren, she needs company too."

"Have they seen each other?"

"I don't think so. He lives in a bed-and-breakfast place."

"What does he do for work?"

"Nothing. He lives off what he made smuggling in Paraguay. Maybe he still has some of his ill-gotten gains."

The words *ill-gotten gains* sounded like a bugle at a wake. A real wake, this time.

"I'm not going to be able to sleep tonight," said Pancho, the simple man.

"I have to work."

"I'll leave you to it," he said.

I was going to say there was no need, but he left. They were, after all, a simple family. Simple people do not commit suicide. At most, they fake them.

The Lady of Osmany was a great book. "It achieves the requirement of any fiction," I wrote, as one of the teenage girls flaunted her enormous and very pretty rear end in search of a bowl of fruit salad, "which is to evade reality in a logical and realistic manner."

COLOMBIA

Remembrances of Things Future

MARIO SZICHMAN (b. 1945)
Translated from the Spanish by Iván Zatz

Critics concur in viewing the author of this sardonic tale as the true Latin American inheritor of the tradition of self-denigrating Jewish humor. His famous novel At 8:25 Evita Became Immortal *(1981), which won the Ediciones del Norte Prize, describes the three-decade-long pilgrimage from immigration to assimilation of the Pechoff family in Buenos Aires, complete with their change of name to Gutiérrez-Anselmi to hide their Jewish identity.*

Set in Poland in 1939—according to the Hebrew calendar the year 5700, a time when Argentine Jews, victimized by the Semana Trágica pogrom and other blunt anti-Semitic attacks, were beginning to recognize the nation as incapable of sustaining democratic values and tolerance—this comic story, published here for the first time, deals with the bombing of Jewish schools, both progressive and Orthodox, and the response of government authorities to Jewish resistance. The narrative viewpoint is that of the mother of Shmulik the galley-proof messenger, a poor woman unable to understand the political implications of her son's unexpected disappearance. The implicit themes, of course, are the Holocaust and Jewish self-hatred.

AT THE TIME that the people in Pinye Ostropoler's town began to search for the whereabouts of their family members, the postman got into the habit of calling twice at first, and three times by the end, until there was no one left in any condition to receive the mail.

Every morning of that hazard-filled year of 1939, the postman would show up in his impeccable gray suit, and with a smile he would present the

good news. In the afternoon, he would show up rigorously attired in mourning clothes, to deliver the instructions to one of the neighbors. It never failed that someone in town would think, "I am sure that someone in my neighbor's family must have done something to deserve these instructions." And those suspicions were usually confirmed. The instructions would order the neighbor to go to the town's century-old tree and pick up a message left atop the fourth branch from the bottom; thus he would find out that his relative's whereabouts had been lost after his becoming an infiltrator. It was signed, "A friend." Usually, after reading the letter, the neighbor would pack up his bundles and take a chartered ship to other lands—ridden by guilt but never by fear, for Poland was a country endowed by laws of a profound humanist content, a beautiful tradition went hand in hand with its population, and may God grant you peace.

One of the few occasions on which this routine was broken happened with Shmulik's mother. Shmulik was the galley-proof messenger. Until receiving the instructions and finding out that his whereabouts were lost after his having become an infiltrator, the woman had been proud of her Shmulik, because his official whereabouts had been a calendar factory in the mountainous region of N. The woman had thought that such whereabouts were immutable, for she had told her Shmulik the fable of the naughty boy who was kidnapped by the monkey after having taken his hands out of his pockets; and so her son never dared to play around with his own buttons or his salary, thus reaching a position where he earned money by the fistful.

When the poor woman received the instructions, she asked Pinye to come along with her to the tree because she did not know how to climb it. Pinye collected the message and that is how the woman found out that it seemed as if her son's whereabouts had been lost. "If you had shown concern for your little treasure's whereabouts, you would have known by now that he is taking his hands out of his pockets. It takes only one step from that to becoming an infiltrator," said the message, signed by the usual friend.

"How did I go wrong?" wondered the poor woman. Perhaps she had given her Shmulik a secular education? But that had been the only way to keep him out of the fun and games. Other kids of his generation had decided sometime in their puberty to take their hands out of their pockets, and there you have it now: they spend the entire day with their noses stuck in some Talmudic scroll trying to find their whereabouts in an unattainable

past splendor, while their women take food out of their own mouths to keep the children fed. But not her Shmulik. Deprived of the use of his hands, Shmulik had to rely on his nose to find the right way to go, and from having used it so many times to steer the sled during the winter, its shape was now aerodynamic. Besides, at the Hebrew calendar-printing shop where Shmulik worked, they were not interested in the past but in the years to come. This was something that, in that year of 1939, the Jews demanded to see in block letters, since they considered it beyond reach. That is why all the members of the community would fight to get calendars; they wanted to lay their hands on a tomorrow riddled with seasons and ceremonies evocative, first, of their martyrs and then of their heroes, sure that the massacre at the hands of Chmielnicki would always be rescinded by the victory of Bar-Kochba.

The calendar-printing shops could not keep up with the demand, and Shmulik's capacity to maintain his hands in his pockets was highly valued, because his long arms allowed him to create huge openings that the typographers would stuff with galley proofs. And, with a slight turn of the head, Shmulik could follow the direction of the wind at twice the speed of other galley messengers.

The owner of the calendar shop rewarded such skill by depositing two hundred zlotys in Shmulik's cap every month. This allowed him to pay for his room and board with a family, whose members were in charge of putting the spoon in and out of his mouth, unbuttoning his clothes, and mending his pockets; even so, he still saved 120 zlotys, which he sent his mother through Nusn, the water carrier.

Shmulik had won eight prizes for best messenger of the month, and the medals clinked proudly on his cap. The owner of the calendar shop had even hinted that there was a possibility of making him a partner. And out of the blue, all this was about to be thrown out the window because the selfish child decided to take his hands out of his pockets—such was the mother's lament to Pinye. Instead of feeling guilty on account of the message in the tree and packing up her bundles, the mother decided to search for her son's whereabouts so she could reproach him for his sudden decision to ruin his own life.

Pinye listened to the woman's grief and counseled patience. Maybe Shmulik had no further need of a whereabouts. The poor woman, however, was not ready to resign herself. Everyone must have a whereabouts, ran her argument. Pinye suggested that perhaps her son had taken his hands out of his pockets to reach for a bottle and, stupefied by the alcohol, had awakened the next day married to a Gypsy. One of those days while the mother was needlessly worrying, the son would be getting ready to give her the great *nakhes* [happiness] of making her a grandma.

The woman reproached Pinye for his insensitivity. It was clear that he had not been the one to give up his life to provide her Shmulik with an education, she told him. Her son was incapable of doing such a thing to his mother.

To placate her, Pinye recommended that she treat her son not only as a youngster who is respectful of tradition but also as an ingrate about to lose his whereabouts. The poor woman, disturbed by such words of consolation, sent a letter in the next morning's mail to the calendar shop where Shmulik worked, demanding to know his whereabouts. She was one of those old-fashioned mothers whose only concern was to devote her whole life to her son, the letter stated.

When the poor woman received a reply by telegram, indicating that the company could not furnish such information and asking her to please not compromise them further, she decided to modify her strategy by sending reproaches written directly on the envelope. She had the habit of addressing her complaints to "The Ingrate Who Is About to Lose His Whereabouts." None of her letters received a reply.

The poor woman came back to Pinye for advice. What did he suggest she do? She did not intend to rest until she found out her son's whereabouts. Wouldn't it be best to go to the police and search in the Missing Persons Bureau? Pinye pleaded with the poor woman not to involve any of the authorities until she knew what to expect. Could she have possibly forgotten about Gitele? She had searched for a half brother who had been accused of becoming an infiltrator. And what happened? When the authorities finally discovered where he was, Gitele remembered that she had had a whole brother before his disappearance. Pinye recommended that the woman wait for a while. The best thing would be to carry out some discreet inquiries. He could take care of the matter.

The woman thanked Pinye for all the trouble he was taking and this time sent her letter in the afternoon mail, addressed to the owner of the calendar-printing shop. In it she worried about the whereabouts of her son,

so respectful of tradition but an ingrate about to ruin his own life. In the postscript she implored the heavens to let there be no suspicious contents in the packages her Shmulik carried.

The owner of the calendar-printing shop received the woman's message, went to the town's century-old tree, collected the letter, and read it, fearing that he had sullied his family name because of some infiltrator. He rolled it up into a ball, threw it into some bushes, packed up his bundles (among which were several boxes with brand-new calendars), left his house in the late hours of the night, and took off for other lands in a chartered ship, the *Cracow Baroness*. The ship obtained denials of asylum in Southampton and Reykjavik and wound up stranded in the Sargasso Sea. Some of the calendar packages were jettisoned to sea when the captain decided to lighten the load on the ship, and they ended up washing ashore in Calais. The cryptographers of the French intelligence service analyzed the calendars and determined that they were texts in code from German spies confirming the invulnerability of the Maginot Line.

Meanwhile, the letter sent by the poor woman to the owner of the calendar-printing shop was found by a park ranger, who unfolded it, smoothed out its creases, examined it by flashlight, adjusted his cap, scratched his head, thought that "he must have done something to deserve this message," and immediately notified the authorities.

The following day, the police were ordered to discreetly surround the printing shop in order to capture the poor woman's son. They knew the infiltrator's description very well: he generally walked around with his hands in his pockets and carried around packages suspicious in nature, as attested by the postscript in the letter written by his mother and the hurried departure of the printing-shop owner.

That afternoon, the police investigation met with success. A stranger, his cap covered with medals, crossed a checkpoint on his sled, carrying two suspicious-looking packages under his arms. When asked about what he carried, he replied that they were galley proofs from over there, pointing toward the printing shop with his aerodynamic nose, since he had his hands in his pockets. The policemen exchanged knowing glances and allowed him to infiltrate the place.

Not ten minutes had gone by when the bomb squad arrived and placed an explosive charge among the suspicious packages, blowing them up. A hole the shape of the foundation was left where the printing shop had previously stood. And exactly in the center of that hole were the remains of a sled, a cap covered with medals, and two suspicious-looking packages, somewhat tattered but able to be collated. They contained galley proofs full of foreign-language characters.

The chief of police, fearing a conspiracy, called an expert in ancient languages, who confirmed his worst suspicions. Someone, in 1939 in Poland, was sparing no effort to fire up the minds of the Jews, filling them with nonsense about the future. And what a future! In a few months they expected to reach the year 5700. The chief of police ordered barricades built on the main access roads to the printing shops to prevent the presence of new infiltrators.

The next day, the poor woman was informed of her son's death in a confrontation with the forces of law and order. Inside the medals on his cap they had found microfilm strips detailing a conspiracy on the part of some Hebrew calendar makers, whose intentions were to sow dissent.

That night, fearing that they had inadvertently sown dissent, the three most important Hebrew calendar makers packed up their bundles, among which were some boxes of brand-new calendars, left their homes in the late hours of the night, and took off to other lands in a chartered ship, the *Countess Petrovia*—ridden by guilt but never by fear. The passengers obtained refusals of asylum in Hamburg and Oslo, and their ship finally ran aground in Antwerp, where they were interned in a concentration camp as prisoners of war.

Some of the packages were analyzed by cryptographers of the Belgian intelligence service, who determined them to be messages in code from German spies recommending respect for the neutrality of that country.

Meanwhile, in Pinye's town, the police were able to quell dissent by blowing up suspicious-looking packages, which Shmulik had dropped off at the doorways of various printing shops before his confrontation with the forces of law and order.

When there wasn't a printing press left untouched, the Hebrew calendar makers met in the barn they were allowed to use as a synagogue to undertake the analysis of their current historical juncture. Might it be that anti-Semitism was happening in their region, they inquired. But a delegate from the Jewish Congress asked them to pipe down, because it wasn't as if they lived (a) in Germany, where the official policy was to stick a yellow star

on every Jew; or (b) in the Ukraine, where the official policy was to drag out the Jews into the main street, chained by the neck, and make them fight the bear while the stationmaster refused to sell them tickets to travel, not even on the roof of the train; or (c) by all means not in Russia, where the czar's official policy was to deny any participation of the Black Cossacks in the pogroms, while Rasputin went around curing all his children, turned into hemophiliacs by the Jewish conspiracy. Given that anti-Semitism was not an official policy, the best thing was to turn to the local authorities, recommended the delegate from the Jewish Congress while pulling up his lapels, since the heat radiated by the gathering of malnourished bodies could not sufficiently counter the cold that entered through the hole where once the roof had been.

Pinye then told the delegate about the disgrace heaped upon the poor woman. One of her messages had fallen into the hands of the local authorities, with results known to everybody. Her ignorance of her son's whereabouts had begun to get every printing shop blown up.

"Couldn't it be that her darling little treasure had been mixed up in some mess?" asked the delegate. "'Cause there are printing shops, and then there are printing shops. It isn't the same to have an Orthodox printing shop as a *progressiver* one. Take the Jews of Tarov, for instance. Their schools started to get blown up. But there are schools, and then there are schools. It is not the same to have an Orthodox school as a progressiver one." They could ask Lubcek, right there in the flesh, how the Jews of Tarov confronted their situation.

Lubcek, the Hungarian, explained to the gathering that the blowing up of Orthodox schools caused the children to go back home, while the blowing up of progressiver schools caused the children to be twice lost. "When they blow up one of our schools," said Lubcek, the Hungarian, "our children stay home and play all day. They don't get tired of playing, the little blessings from God: Oh, how they play! Then we feel remorse, we go to the synagogue, the rabbi reads some chapters of the Talmud where the prophets have foreseen that this would come to pass by reason of the sins we have committed, and we rebuild the school in double shifts so that our children are not deprived of their education. The government sends a communiqué, addressed to the noble and suffering Hebrew community, promising a deserved punishment to whoever is held responsible, and Father Zozim, chaplain of the local

chapter of the Black Cossacks, comes to the reopening of the facility. On the other hand when the progressiver schools are blown up, all the students go underground, the government uncovers a conspiracy to have the throats of its most distinguished citizens brought to the guillotine, and one of the subversives always ends up murdered at the hands of one of his own comrades so that they can pin the blame on the police."

The people attending the meeting decided to send a petition to the authorities begging for their case to be considered. After all, they were Orthodox calendar makers, not progressiver.

The calendar makers were met with open arms by the mayor; the blowing up of their printing shops had deprived him of the 20 percent levy on alien activities. The mayor offered them tea with lemon and they all celebrated when he drank it in the Russian manner, clenching a lump of sugar between his teeth. After praising the noble and long-suffering Hebrew community and announcing a new luxury tax to be collected by his son on the first and fifteenth days of every month, the mayor ordered the chief of police to extend any and all necessary protection to the calendar makers. And more.

Regrettably, the overzealousness of the police was detrimental to the activities of commerce; with their eyes ruined by the profusion of searchlights looking for clues in their facilities and their behinds injured by poorly trained guard dogs, the majority of the calendar makers decided to leave in a chartered ship, the *Monrovia Duchess*. The travelers were able to obtain denials of asylum in Havana and Barranquilla, they crossed the Strait of Magellan, and from there the ship went straight to the Sargasso Sea, where it ended up stranded next to the *Cracow Baroness*.

Meanwhile, six Hebrew calendar makers who had been unable to take the ship on time with the rest of their colleagues were summoned by the chief of police to his office. On the functionary's desk was a cookie jar that read "Citizens for Responsibility Fund." The chief of police said that he had called on them to exhort them to renew their labor. He reminded them that their country was endowed by laws of a profound humanist content, a beautiful tradition went hand in hand with its population, and may God grant them peace. No one was forced to embroider a yellow star on their clothes; nor were they forced to go out on the street to fight the bear, and, moreover, stationmasters allowed Jews to travel on the roof of the train. They were living in the year 1939, this was Poland, and, moreover, the noble

and long-suffering Hebrew community expected to reach in a few months the year 5700. The indigenous population thought this difference to be an unfair privilege. Why not try to make the Hebrew calendar gradually come to match the Gregorian one? If they could find a way to bridge that gap, he would be very grateful to them. He appealed exclusively to their sense of duty. Indeed, he considered them to be responsible citizens. Or at least responsible. Discussions about their citizenship would come later. By the way, any contribution of two hundred, five hundred, or a thousand zlotys was entirely left up to the donors.

The calendar makers, mindful of the appeals from the chief of police, decided at that moment to begin producing calendars with increasingly lapsed dates in order to bridge that gap. The victory of Bar-Kochba continued to be marked, but the massacre of Chmielnicki was abruptly deleted, eliminating in one blow four hundred years of *tsuris* (misfortune). One of the makers even proposed to follow the suggestion of an expert on Delaporte calendars to limit each month to twenty-eight days. He figured out that this way, in a thousand years the Jews would be able to accomplish a history almost as wretched as that of the Polish people. But the proposal was discarded, since it meant that every year would begin exactly on the same day, obviating the need to make new calendars.

Afterward, the calendar makers began competing with each other to see who could avoid the most years of calamity. For instance, when one of them decided to cancel 1321 because that was the year of the Chinon Massacre, another responded by eliminating with one pen stroke the years 640 and 1096, thus wiping out the campaign of forced conversions in Byzantium and the Crusaders' massacre in Ratisbon. Each time they were able to eliminate a few years from their calendars, the makers would appear before the chief of police, proudly demonstrating how the gap between the Hebrew and Gregorian calendars was decreasing. "We have already reached 4383, but that won't be all, that won't be all," the spokesman for the calendar makers would inform the chief of police. "It is my belief that, within a short time, we will be able to achieve even less history than the Swiss."

Clearly, the zeal that went into excising their past would sometimes limit the horizon of the calendar makers, like the time they discarded 1492 to eliminate the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and were left with the Americas yet to be discovered. But the dwindling Jewish community did not complain about such potholes. The calendars had returned happiness to them, and they did not wish to lose it by clinging to historical rigor, for life itself already is full of sorrow.

Meanwhile, the poor woman who had lost her son's whereabouts in the confrontation, with the force of law and order received 120 zlotys from Nusn, the water carrier, accompanied by a newspaper clipping reporting the strange presence of a man with his hands stuck in his pockets ten minutes before the printing shops were blown up in places as remote as Radom, Kielce, and Pwtrkow. The latest conflagration, said the reporter, had propelled the stranger toward the *Monrovia Duchess*, a ship scheduled to make stops in Havana and Barranquilla.

Mad with joy, the mother ran to show the clipping to the chief of police, who, upon seeing the reappearance of the likeness of someone who had died in a confrontation with the forces of law and order, searched in the Missing Persons Bureau, removed one name from the list, inserted it in the list of people who had died in a confrontation with the forces of law and order, placed the poor woman's son in the list where that recently found person had just been, and decided to apprehend the infiltrator dead or alive.

Initially, the chief of police had thought of continuing to quell the pockets of dissent with the help of the bomb squad. But immediately afterward, torn between the need to deal with the purveyors of social schism and the problems of the Internal Revenue Service, he decided to convene the calendar makers and ordered them to immediately report to him the presence of any infiltrator with his hands in his pockets. Furthermore, he informed them that as of that moment, they were to mark the national holidays in their Hebrew calendars, which carried a 10 percent tax on indigenous activities. And until the new collecting office could be set up, they would be able to deposit their tax payment in his personal account.

The Hebrew calendar makers gladly accepted those demands. They had no problem in reporting the presence of infiltrators, since they had been informed that the latest whereabouts of Shmulik's likeness was reportedly aboard the *Monrovia Duchess*, near the Sargasso Sea. As for the other part, they were enthusiastic about sharing their calendars with the Polish people, since that could only increase their sales.

However, upon inspection of the indigenous Polish calendars, the makers stumbled upon an unexpected difficulty. It might have been that those

calendars were made in poor-quality printing shops, or perhaps it was due to negligence on the part of the historians, but the fact was that the majority of the national holidays coincided with the celebration of some pogrom.

The Hebrew calendar makers were in a real quandary. If they entered the national holidays they would lose all their Jewish clients; if they left them out, the protection offered by the local authorities would cease. Perplexed and undecided, they opted to ask for an appointment to see their protector.

The chief of police received them in his office and told them he was at their disposal. When the calendar makers presented him with their dilemma, the chief of police responded that they lived in a free country. There was no prior restraint, mail was not opened, and there were no laws or suspension of constitutional guarantees, a beautiful tradition went hand in hand with the population, and may God grant them peace. If they wished to continue making calendars without mentioning those dates on which the precious blood of the Polish people had been spilled, well, that was up to them.

That night, five of the six calendar makers tossed their few belongings into their trunks and took off aboard the *Moscovia Princess*, intending to join their old colleagues. The travelers were denied asylum in Valparaiso and El Callao. Even the Bolivian authorities offered to reject them, despite the fact that their nation lacked any access to the sea. Finally, the ship stumbled upon the *Cracow Baroness* and the *Monrovia Duchess* in the Sargasso Sea. The emaciated passengers of the *Cracow Baroness* and the *Monrovia Duchess* were transferred to the *Moscovia Princess*.

After meeting with denials of asylum in some minor ports, the *Moscovia Princess* ran aground in Antwerp, near the *Petrovia Countess*. While the combined passengers of all four ships were being interned in a prison camp, the Second World War broke out and they were liberated by the Nazis, who mistook them for Croatians. The calendar makers gathered their dwindling belongings and fled on to France. The war caught them by surprise over there, and they were forced to hide in caves and survive on wild truffles and strawberries. When the liberation took place, they were put in front of the firing squad, first because they spent the years of hardship living like Persian kings, and second because the code messages in their calendars had proclaimed the invulnerability of the Maginot Line, allowing their French patriots to rest on their laurels.

With respect to Shmulik's mother, every month she continued to receive

120 zlotys through Nusn, the water carrier, during the first two years of the war, and 200 zlotys from the last calendar maker left in town. The only thing that the calendar maker asked for in return was confirmation of Shmulik's definite absence from the town.

Armed with the newspaper clipping provided by the poor woman, and hoping to stay in business, the calendar maker decided to make use of the infallible recourse of currying official favor by plastering his calendars with previously forgotten national holidays safely distant from the dates of the pogroms. Everyone was happy, especially the Polish people, who for the likes of them had never imagined the existence of so many victories. Nonetheless, even with the greatest of effort, it was impossible to find a full supply of national holidays. Some months had to be fixed by including the Miraculous Apparition of the Virgin. For other months, the calendar maker would add mottos such as "Do not forget that next month we have a bounty of national holidays" or "There are only fifteen days left, how much can two weeks matter when we already have an important national holiday coming up?" But then came a recalcitrant month. There wasn't a single national holiday that could bring about any popular enthusiasm; nor was there a single Miraculous Apparition of the Virgin, and the next month marked a patriotic victory that had left the nation with 62,500 square miles of unredeemed territory provisionally occupied by Germany and Russia.

The calendar maker thought and thought about it and finally arrived at what he supposed to be a good way to solve this. "Fortunately, as soon as next month's victory goes by, we will have something to celebrate," he wrote. But he would not be in any condition to do so.

Conversely, Shmulik's mother was able to celebrate her reunion with her son. One day she received a letter from Shmulik that announced his return and detailed his odyssey, starting with his escape from the explosions and ending with his arrival in Spain. The first detonation, he explained to his mother, had blasted him a distance from the shop, making it impossible for him to collect his cap filled with medals. After getting away from that place, he had been very busy dropping off Hebrew calendar galley proofs in the doorways of other printing shops, but the explosions kept throwing him farther and farther away, until he ended up without a job. At that moment, he discovered that there was no further purpose in going about with his hands in his pockets. He tried other fields of endeavor, but word had been getting around that his nose

was like a magnet for the bomb squad, so he chose to get away, for a while, from everyone he knew. That was the reason he went aboard the *Monrovia Duchess*. Until things cleared up, the poor woman's son said the best course of action was to travel, to be at one with nature, to spend each night under a different sky. In order to avoid new temptations, he had decided to begin proofreading captain's logbooks written in unknown languages. He was particularly interested in ignoring the language used in the logbook of the *Flying Dutchman*. But the log was sewn together with a grammar of the Bru language, the tongue of an Austro-Asiatic people, and Shmulik had become so fascinated by its complexity that he gave up all suspicion and studied it until he became an expert. Did his mother know that the Bru language had forty-one vowels? Thanks to that newly acquired knowledge, he was able to find out in the captain's logbook the way to free the ship that had run aground and pilot it over to Amsterdam, where a mine sent them flying through the air. Holding onto a piece of wood, Shmulik had floated all the way to Copenhagen and was able to seek refuge inside a windmill. He now figured that it would take him two more days to reach his hometown. Perhaps, he told his mother, they could get together under the century-old tree.

This time, the poor woman decided to seek Pinye's advice before taking action. Pinye suggested to her that there were sons, and then there were sons. It wasn't the same to have an Orthodox son as a progressiver one. The problem was that Orthodox children would return home in difficult times. On the other hand, progressiver children died twice. Why didn't she consider her son to be progressiver and thus lose him a second time?

The next morning, the poor woman went in tears to the *Free Tribune* news office and announced that she no longer had to know her son's whereabouts, since she had found out that he was dead. That very night the poor woman put her meager belongings in a trunk and left to meet with her son. The reunion was a tearful one.

The next day, the mayor read in the *Free Tribune* that the poor woman's son had been assassinated by one of his own comrades anxious to pin the blame on the constitutional authorities, and the mayor demanded the resignation of the chief of police for falsely attributing his death to a confrontation with the forces of law and order. Furthermore, as a Draconian measure, he decided to increase the postman's rounds to three a day, seeking to make up for losses of tax revenue by confiscating the property of absentee landlords.

A Nice Boy from a Good Family

ANA MARÍA SHUA (b. 1951)
Translated from the Spanish by Andrea G. Labinger

Ana María Shua was born in Buenos Aires. She has published books in various genres and is the recipient of many literary awards. Three of her novels and three of her books of microfiction have been translated into English and published in the United States. Among her many international recognitions, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for her novel The Book of Memories *(1998). Shua's novel* Los amores de Laurita *(Laurita's Loves [1984]), from which this excerpt is taken, was made into a motion picture. Shua is recognized as one of the principal Latin American cultivators of the* microrrelato, *a genre of extremely short fiction. Her fiction for adults and children has been widely anthologized and translated into many languages.*

LAURITA'S HEAD THROBS as she stands there for a moment, pausing but about to leave, with her hand on the doorknob, as she tries to understand the force of that surprising gust of wind that's lifted her so high, all the way to the seventeenth floor of the Santos Dumont Building on Avenida Gorlero, Punta del Este, to this empty apartment, beside Kalnicky Kamiansky, who, sitting on the floor in his underwear, sobs in anguish, invoking his grandpa León while the radio blares "Hey Jude" by the Beatles.

Her guilt is so evident that it's pointless to try either to justify or refute it. Laurita isn't looking for absolution, just a slightly reduced sentence. At this point she's not even attempting to reconstruct the facts or figure out where her culpability began: when she accepted the invitation to go upstairs and into the apartment or much earlier, when her own grandmother offered to

introduce her to a nice boy from a good family and she'd said yes, of course, she'd love to, all too eager to demonstrate that she had nothing against the good Jewish families that were prepared to offer their coveted male offspring on the open market.

The fact is, Laurita was growing bored during that terribly hot summer in Punta del Este, where (as her mother had reminded her once more before they left, as they loaded the car with jars of jam and blocks of cheese because everything was so expensive in Uruguay) such a nice atmosphere prevailed.

A few days earlier, wordlessly rejecting the comfortable, casual old clothes that Laurita usually wore, her mother had taken her to the finest boutiques on Callao, Quintana, and Avenida Alvear, where she'd bought her three new outfits consisting of bell-bottom pants and short-sleeved jackets, a light summer coat, several blouses and shirts, and even a long, golden cocktail gown, an item her mother had declared essential for places like the San Rafael Casino. Feeling humiliated, Laurita had protested and argued with her mother as well as with the blameless saleswomen, but now she was quite happy with her new wardrobe, which her mother had insisted on packing into the suitcase herself, carefully folding the garments to avoid wrinkles, like an experienced hunter who examines, oils, and carefully lays out the weapons that his son must learn to use on their next expedition: Punta del Este, elite game preserve.

The atmosphere, however, was indeed fabulous, and Laurita wasn't about to object to going out with one of those luminous, tanned young men whom she saw and ogled (but never directly) on the beach, those boys who took their parents' cars out at night, speeding along the ocean drive toward unknown destinations, accompanied by slender blondes.

But Laurita had no friends in Punta del Este. She had never been there before and so wasn't familiar with the local rituals of flirtation. Every afternoon she strolled fruitlessly down Avenida Gorlero, bedecked in her best finery, and even though by a week after arriving there she was resigned to the general lack of knowledge of Hinduism, the lack of sensitivity toward the Latin American political situation, the total ignorance of Borges's work, and even the confusion of the subjunctive mood with the conditional tense, not a single gentleman had invited her to join him for a spin in his turbocharged vehicle along that ocean-side speedway.

Hey, where are you from? a smartly coiffed young man had shouted at

her from his car after Laurita had endured ten days and ten long evenings of playing knock rummy with her grandma, who, equally devoid of friends and nearly as bored as Laurita, missed the unruly crowds at the Bristol, where everyone or practically everyone spoke Yiddish and drank tea with pastries.

Japan, Laurita shouted back, but as she would later learn, the question made sense because Miguel was from Uruguay, was formally engaged, and in three months would be married forever. And so naturally he was concerned about the nationality of his casual dates and was careful to avoid Uruguayan girls, especially if they were from Montevideo. He tried not to be seen with Laurita in places where he knew he might run into his compatriots. And even though she had liked his opening moves, the way he showed his hand from the start, she couldn't help wanting to take a bit of revenge by refusing to remove her kerchief when he showed up the following afternoon to invite her out for tea and cake at an inn on the road to San Rafael.

Two enormous rollers with their respective clips crowned Laurita's head, which was adorned with seven additional bobby pins that poked their own tiny, curious heads out from beneath the green scarf that covered the masterpiece; a thick, gooey fragrance of Pantene completed the ensemble that any bride, a real bride just three months before her wedding, would never have allowed herself to wear.

On the way to the inn, Miguel stopped his little Fiat and attempted the difficult maneuver of embracing her with one hand while with the other trying to activate the mechanism that would lower Laurita's seat, converting it into a kind of bed. It was obvious from the careful coordination of his movements that Miguel had practiced this complicated operation many times before, and Laurita wondered if there had been an actual woman present during those rehearsals, because Miguel seemed much more interested in completing the maneuver with his left hand as planned than in securing her cooperation with his right.

But the seat-lowering lever was stuck, and Miguel returned to his own place to consider the situation with both hands on the wheel, so demoralized and furious, so absent from Laurita, that he seemed to have forgotten about her completely. Damn lever, Miguel repeated, punctuated by harsh invectives hurled against cars in general, those manufactured in Turin by Fiat in particular, and all the inhabitants of the Italian peninsula and its territories, without even stopping to consider the possibility that Laurita

might be willing to move ahead despite the mechanical breakdown. One minute later he let her out of the car and concentrated on dismantling the damaged mechanism, dirtying his hands with grease, huffing and protesting while Laurita stood, bored, by the side of the road.

One hour later they arrived at the inn, both of them in a foul mood. Laurita ordered a waffle with honey and Miguel a lemon pie. They gazed at each other as they ate, revived a little by the sugar. Miguel was a chemist. His father owned an important laboratory. His friends called him Tenfingers—You'll soon find out why, he said with wicked pride, rubbing his legs against Laurita's under the table.

But Laurita never found out why because that very night Miguel came back and announced that his fiancée had unexpectedly arrived in Montevideo, but that he'd try to see Laurita at all costs, would see her, in fact, in very short visits for the rest of that month, never at night, and never for long enough to allow Miguel to develop his seduction technique, that incremental series of advances which, considering the embarrassing failure of his initial attempt, he now considered indispensable to her conquest.

Why not be grateful, then, for the unforeseen arrival on the scene of Kalnicky Kamiansky, deus ex machina, summoned by her grandmother to rescue Laurita from long afternoons devoted to Lautréamont and filled churros, an act of simultaneous consumption that in her mind would forever link Maldoror, terrifying as an eagle, with the taste of sugar on the crispy, golden, slightly greasy crust of the churros. Laurita had always enjoyed reading, but especially in winter: the cold beckoned her to armchairs, solitude, and woolen socks. In the summer it was nearly impossible: the heat gently, acidly called out to her, forcing her to lose herself, eyes heavenward, in the color and texture of the sand.

I'm a doctor, Kalnicky Kamiansky had told her as they walked along the shore, avoiding the jellyfish that evaporated sadly amid the seaweed and oil stains, unfortunate details that it was best to ignore if one was to justify the high price of ice cream and rentals. And, pausing to emphasize what he was about to announce, Kalnicky completed the utterance: not just a doctor but practically a cardiologist. He was specializing, working at his uncle's practice. Kalnicky Kamiansky, pride of his parents, he of the very close-set eyes and ample hips, said that his only regret was that his Grandpa León hadn't lived to see him receive his medical degree.

"Do you know," he asked Laurita, "do you know who León Kamiansky was in the Jewish community?"

But Laurita, alas, had no idea who León Kamiansky had been, let alone in the Jewish community, an entity that had always struck her as a little vague and always intimidating, one with which she'd never maintained a relationship, one to which she so inevitably belonged that it seemed unnecessary to participate in it, its institutions, or its groups.

I am a Kamiansky, Kalnicky Kamiansky, he assured her with enviable pride. Do you know who the Kamianskys were in Russia under the czar? Laurita tried to collect her scattered knowledge of Russia under the czar, but her readings of Tolstoy or Pushkin had nothing to say about the Kamiansky family's activity in the court of the Emperor of All the Russias.

Laurita liked Kalnicky Kamiansky's fierce attachment to his Grandpa León; in fact it was the only thing about him she *did* like, and while he insisted on pointing out the wonders of the apartment that his parents had given him on the seventeenth floor of the Santos Dumont Building, living room and bedroom with an ocean view, she would have preferred to steer the conversation toward the subject of León Kamiansky, deceased leader, philanthropist, temple founder, businessman.

Her parents were happy to see her finally dating a nice boy from a good family: the investment was beginning to pay off, and Laurita wanted to demonstrate her goodwill to the utmost, although she secretly felt it was unfair because, like her, they wouldn't have been able to tolerate the joyous itemization of possessions in which Kalnicky Kamiansky obviously delighted and wallowed: his resonant surname, his university degree, his Peugeot 404, his apartment in the ghastly bulk of the Santos Dumont Building. Kalnicky Kamiansky grossly exceeded the virtues that her parents had expected in a nice boy from a good family.

However, Kalnicky Kamiansky had invited her to dinner. To a restaurant. For seafood. Never before had a man invited Laurita to have seafood with him at a restaurant. Sometimes men had asked her out for coffee and it was perfect: Jungian archetypes with a latte; cultural malaise and spaghetti al pesto at Pippo's. Laurita had even wangled a memorable barbecue at Pichín along with Hegelian dialectics; the mythical horizon and croissants; Engels and Gramsci with a crepe at La Martona, and everything was comme il faut except for the fact that sometimes Laurita had to pick up the check. But

never, never before had a man been prepared to make such an investment in her by inviting her to a restaurant in Punta del Este for seafood.

Laurita was touched, shaken, and, above all, astonished to discover this unexpected, whorish vocation of hers: a man was going to spend money for the pleasure of her company, and that pleased her. It pleased her enormously. Women, she had once read—randomly opening one of the volumes of Freud's *Complete Works*, so nicely bound in real leather, so expensive, so official looking—women, because they are polymorphous perverse, are especially suited for prostitution. What nonsense, but it wasn't that sort of polymorphous perverse pleasure that she expected from Kalnicky Kamiansky, but rather to be paid for, evaluated, the as-yet-unknown pleasure of watching a man take money, genuine money, out of his wallet in order to pay a lofty amount for the pleasure of being, of having been, with her. How lovely, Laurita, her mother had said, at last you're going out with a well-dressed, decent boy who takes you to dinner, a nice boy from a good family.

And so Laurita chose moderately expensive dishes, and Kalnicky Kamiansky didn't even wait for the shrimp cocktails, overflowing with Russian dressing and too much lettuce, before explaining that he also owned an apartment of his own in Buenos Aires, Barrio Norte, living room, two bedrooms, two baths, even though for now he still lived with his parents. Ever downward, unaware of the steep precipice over which his words were pushing him, he went on enumerating, taking inventory: my family has a chalet in Los Troncos, a huge chalet, in the neighborhood of Los Troncos de Mar del Plata. It used to belong to my grandfather. You should see the garden, what an incredible garden, said Kalnicky Kamiansky, gazing at her tenderly over the fried calamari.

But Laurita wasn't inclined to go on with the real estate survey; she wanted to enjoy her dessert. Laurita had discovered that all men and women in this world have at least one story, a good story worth listening to; even Kalnicky Kamiansky, doctor-and-practically-a-cardiologist, one-bedroom apartment in Punta, bachelor pad in Buenos Aires, shared chalet in Los Troncos, had one, and it wasn't hard for her to find it, extract it from him. Kalnicky Kamiansky's story was a love story, and it both pained and delighted him to tell it.

It also pained Laurita to listen to it; his boring, meaningless words hurt her ears; it was painful to hear him express an affection that was probably real with the conventional vocabulary and monotonous, hackneyed expressions of a soap opera.

She wasn't Jewish, this true love of Kalnicky (now more than ever) Kamiansky's. She was a neighborhood girl who studied at the Pitman Academy. He loved her dearly, she loved him dearly, but she wasn't Jewish, and he suffered to think of the name Kamiansky, that surname so distinguished by his Grandpa León in the Jewish community, linked with a miserable Sánchez, a common Sánchez, dragged through the mud. Kalnicky Kamiansky had suffered terribly, deliberating over the problem, and when his Grandpa León fell ill he knew he had to leave her. She herself asked me to, you see how much she loved me, she herself asked me to break it off so that she wouldn't see me suffer so much. Don't think my grandpa León said anything to me; he wasn't that kind of person; he never pried into my life; he knew everything, and he just looked at me, nothing else, with those sad eyes of his, and I understood. It was worse when he died. I felt like crap whenever I was with her; it always seemed like my grandpa León was right next to me, looking at me with his sad eyes.

When I have a son (at this point Kalnicky Kamiansky had regained his composure; after a brief pause he remembered the charlotte and was pouring the warm chocolate sauce over the nearly melted ice cream, which overflowed the dish), he said calmly, looking right at Laurita, I want to give him my grandpa's name, but a little more up to date; León is sort of old-fashioned, don't you think? When I have a son, I'm going to call him Lionel.

Later, on the way home, they kissed in Kalnicky Kamiansky's comfortable Peugeot, and Laurita once again had the opportunity to be surprised at herself, at her body, always ready to desire, even a man as radically undesirable as Kalnicky Kamiansky, practically-a-cardiologist, nestled against her chest. Only abstinence, Laurita told herself, could justify this urge, this general, mechanical urge, which chance had at that moment centered on that disagreeable man who was kissing her enthusiastically and ineptly. If you're willing to make me happy, Kalnicky Kamiansky ickily murmured as they said good night, I'll treat you like a queen.

It was hard, then, very hard, to explain why Laurita agreed to see him again the next afternoon, one more date that she'd decided would be their last. Hard to explain why she had allowed herself to be embraced so tightly on that lonely little beach where it was cold, seagulls squawked unpleasantly, and reality dully overcame imagination.

You've made me happy, Kalnicky Kamiansky unexpectedly announced to her, and not even then did Laurita quite understand the exquisite metaphor he used to refer to his orgasms; so summarily had poor Kalnicky Kamiansky come, so abruptly, not even against her body, so drily that she didn't even notice; but many years later it came back to her when an enormously fat taxi driver, after staring at her intently in the rearview mirror, had gushed: I'll give you everything, baby, if you make me happy I'll give you everything, even my Ford Falcon, baby, everything.

You've got to see my ocean-view apartment, Kalnicky Kamiansky had proclaimed on the little beach. You've got to see it: it's wonderful, amazing, a gift from my parents when I graduated from medical school; you've got to see the ocean from the seventeenth floor of the Santos Dumont Building, what a sight, you can't miss it, you'll have to see it.

I don't want to go to bed with you, Laurita told him. No, silly, you've got a dirty mind; you can only think of one thing. I want to show you the ocean, the ocean view, you'll see what an apartment it is; besides, it's empty, there's no bed; it's all mine, a gift from my parents. I'm not going to bed with you, Laurita had repeated in the elevator, as he carefully abstained from touching her in order to demonstrate the purity of his intentions; it was merely a question of showing off his property, his horizontal wealth.

I'm not going to bed with him, Laurita said to herself. So then why are you here, you stupid fool, when you know perfectly well what comes next? And it was true: it had an ocean view, Kalnicky Kamiansky's one-bedroom apartment did, just as he'd claimed, and he insisted on leaving the door open *so you'll see what a dirty mind you have*, and it was empty, I'm going to furnish it next season, we'll see if the exchange rate improves, completely empty, just a portable radio on the wooden floor, it's so hot in here, he said, aren't you hot, it's awfully hot, why don't you take off your shirt? Wanna dance? I said *dance*, that's all, don't think I meant something else, said Kalnicky Kamiansky, that heartbreaker, with incredible subtlety, I can't stand the heat, what a miserable climate, as he stepped out of his pants, a nice boy from a good family in underpants moving to the beat of "Hey Jude" sung loudly over the radio by the Beatles, one of them anyway, whom Laurita's terrible auditory memory was unable to identify.

Laurita's head throbs as she stands there for a moment, pausing but about to leave, with her hand on the knob of the half-opened door, halted by the sobs of Kalnicky Kamiansky, who sits on the floor, crying, invoking his Grandpa León. Why? asks Kalnicky Kamiansky between hiccups and tears, Why does this have to happen to me, Grandpa León, why did you die, Grandpa, why did I have to break up with that nice girl who really loved me, Grandpa, and now I have to get involved with one of those psychoanalyzed Jewish chicks who thinks she's so smart because she's read Mahatma Gandhi's latest best seller, when any woman of mine would live like a queen, Grandpa?