



# The House Loses<sup>1</sup>

Juan Villoro\*

**T**errales was founded by people who were unprepared, people who ran out of gas in the mountains and didn't want to walk back under the desert sun. The only gathering place (though it would be more accurate to say "stopping off place," not "gathering place") was a broken down shed where truckers used to play poker. For some reason unknown to anyone, everyone there called three spades "Terrales." They were always bad luck.

Radio turned over his three losing cards. He didn't need to show the other two.

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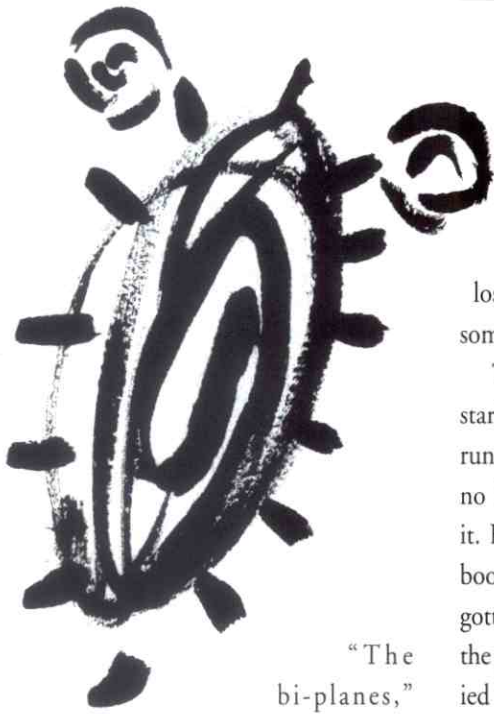
"How about a shot?" Guadalupe came close to the table.

La Polar's owner knew where the truckers were coming from; she had toured the North with Los Intrépidos, a musical group dressed like space cowboys. For a few years she got them gigs, stage managing (something she called "watching over the 'stend'") in all the towns along the border, and spent a while in Monterrey in a house with two parabolic antennas. Her moment of glory came in the United States when she lived with a Gringo who took her to see "The Nutcracker on Ice." Her "anticlimax" (she liked repeating the word that she had gotten from the changing fortunes of Los Intrépidos) also

came on "the Other Side": the Gringo dropped her off at the dentist and never came back for her, as though foreseeing the porcelain jackets that would "disfigure her laugh."

"What I need is heart," moaned a pitiful voice emanating from the lights and plastic bubbles of the jukebox.

Guadalupe touched Radio's shirt with her strong fingers, the same ones she had once used to poke around in his pants. He had a muddy memory of the morning he had come into La Polar for coffee; they had both been up all night, he at the Mountain Pass transmitter and she, waiting on tables. They looked at each other like sleepwalkers until a boom split the air.



"The bi-planes," said Guadalupe. They looked out at the canyon and saw crop dusters spewing out sprays of pink-colored poison. Guadalupe pulled down his fly and caressed him with that proficiency born of opening bottles with one hand. Radio had seen a woman bite the umbilical cord of a newborn with her teeth. Guadalupe acted like that, with practical urgency. When he felt he was emptying himself toward the precipice, she said, "A mandrake will grow," one of those strange things she learned with Los Intrépidos, or in Monterrey, or with the Gringo who took her to the ballet on ice. They did not repeat the encounter or talk about it. From then on, Radio supposed to himself that Guadalupe's secrets were more important than just her city stories. The pink clouds of smoke, the cold air, the planes diving and the almost unbearable caress merged into a single word, "mandrake." He never asked what she meant by it because he wanted it to continue to mean the unconnected things of that early morning.

"...and in the warehouse there were a thousand watermelons..." Guadalupe

spoke to no one in particular. She started a sentence in the back room and finished it at any one of the metal tables. "The house loses!" she exclaimed when she saw someone come in through the door.

The man had a red face; his fixed, staring eyes betrayed the fact that he had run the straightaway from Quemada with no break, and he hadn't stopped hating it. He came forward, without lifting his boots up off the floor, as if he had forgotten how to walk. He stopped next to the picture of Saint Christopher; he studied "The Truck Driver's Prayer":

*Grant me, My Lord God, a steady hand  
and a vigilant eye,  
So that on my way I cause no harm to  
anyone.*

"This way." Guadalupe took him by the arm.

"I've come from Zapata," said the man.

In any county in the country you could find a town by that name. To produce that face and those slow-motion movements, this trucker's Zapata must have been two sleepless nights away.

"Don't you have a helper?" asked Guadalupe.

"Where's the can?"

Guadalupe took him out back, through the hallway of moldy planks. Would she help him in everything, with those hard, hurt hands that repaired everything? Radio watched her unhurriedly when she came back into the room; the woman's skinny body, her bloodshot eyes betrayed overwork, the hours breaking up blocks of ice to chill already cold beers, the nights handling drunks and vomit with no disgust whatever. What miracle or what tra-

gedy had put her there? What had happened to her somewhere else so that this seemed better?

"May I?" A hand with a skull ring pointed to the empty chair. "What's the deal? Las Vegas rules or five-card stud?"

Even two chairs away, Radio could smell the sheepskin vest on the recent arrival. The man picked up his hand and drank down an Estrella that no one had offered him. He looked recovered, tensely aware. He must have had enough cocaine to go all the way to Zapata and back.

"Going to the border?" someone asked him.

"Where else?"

After a couple of uneventful games, the man looked at Radio.

"You work in Mountain Pass?"

"How do you know?"

"By that fucking little emblem," he said, pointing to Radio's sleeve: a microphone pierced by lightning. "I didn't know you wore a uniform. We've talked lots of times. Your voice sounds louder over the mike."

The shirt was one of those ridiculous gifts the truckers left him, with publicity for a Mississippi radio station. The red lightning bolts trimmed with yellow thread made you think of a comic book superhero.

There were five players at the table, but the trucker only introduced himself to Radio.

"Chuy Mendoza," he said, holding out a fat hand.

"What you got in the rig?" asked another player.

Mendoza studied his cards, took a deep breath, touched his chest cautiously, as though he had a bite he had already scratched too often.

"Fine wood."

Radio thought of protected trees, a clandestine sawmill, customs officials bribed to let the planks through to the Other Side.

He wasn't surprised when the other said, "You want to up the ante?"

Two players looked at their watches and got up. At the back of the room, Guadalupe polished the lead elephant she had saved from an accident. The landscape decorating the place also came from a crash. A beer truck had turned over nearby and she had kept a sheet of metal painted with an ice-bound bay. That's where the place got its name, La Polar. At the bottom of the painting, under an *auroa borealis*, there were lumpy shapes that could have been bears or igloos. Radio concentrated on that last part of the painting until he felt a hand on his forearm.

"How many?"

He asked for two cards. He was surprised at his own calm when he lost the hand. He pushed the bottle caps that took the place of chips.

"You start at seven, right?" Chuy Mendoza asked him. "We've got a half an hour left. If you want, I'll come back with you to Mountain Pass and we can keep the game going there, until we drop. I've got cards."

Again he spoke only to him. He knew his schedule, how he

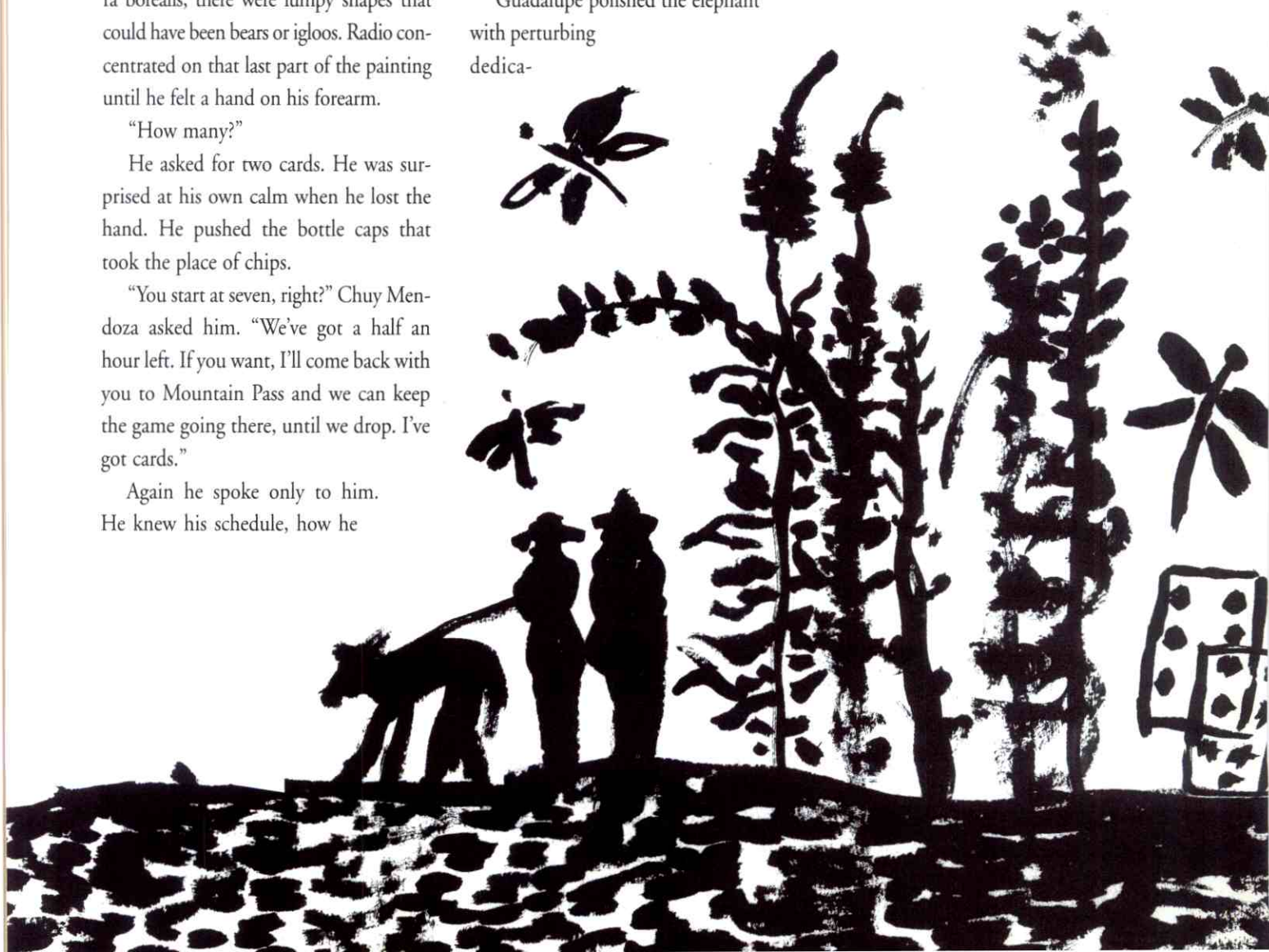
liked cards. He pressed his chest again, opening a button to scratch. Radio could see a necklace with a gold animal, the kind of jewelry Los Intrépidos would wear when they made it.

Then he looked at the peeling snake-skin boots, very expensive, very beaten up. The name Chuy Mendoza sounded fake, like some gunfighter in a movie by the Almada Brothers. The fine wood must be another fabrication. The only truth was that he wanted to stay awake all night. Maybe he needed to get to the border during the graveyard shift.

"I'm out," said the other player still at the table. This made Radio's answer easier.

Guadalupe polished the elephant with perturbing dedica-

tion. Radio would have preferred that the others stay around, with that indifference with which they listened to the Gringo who came in every Saturday to talk about nuclear war and proposed building a bomb shelter on the mountain. Now, everybody pretended to mind their own business, with annoying discretion. What did the trucker know about him? He knew his voice, the words that helped the rigs get through the fog. He had come in as though they had an appointment. Maybe he was in the know. Maybe their radio conversations had been a confused confession, a thousand times



interrupted, but a confession in the end. No, not even Guadalupe knew that. He was nothing more than a nocturnal microphone. He had even gotten used to thinking of himself as "Radio" and he was startled when Patricia shouted his name the first time they slept together.

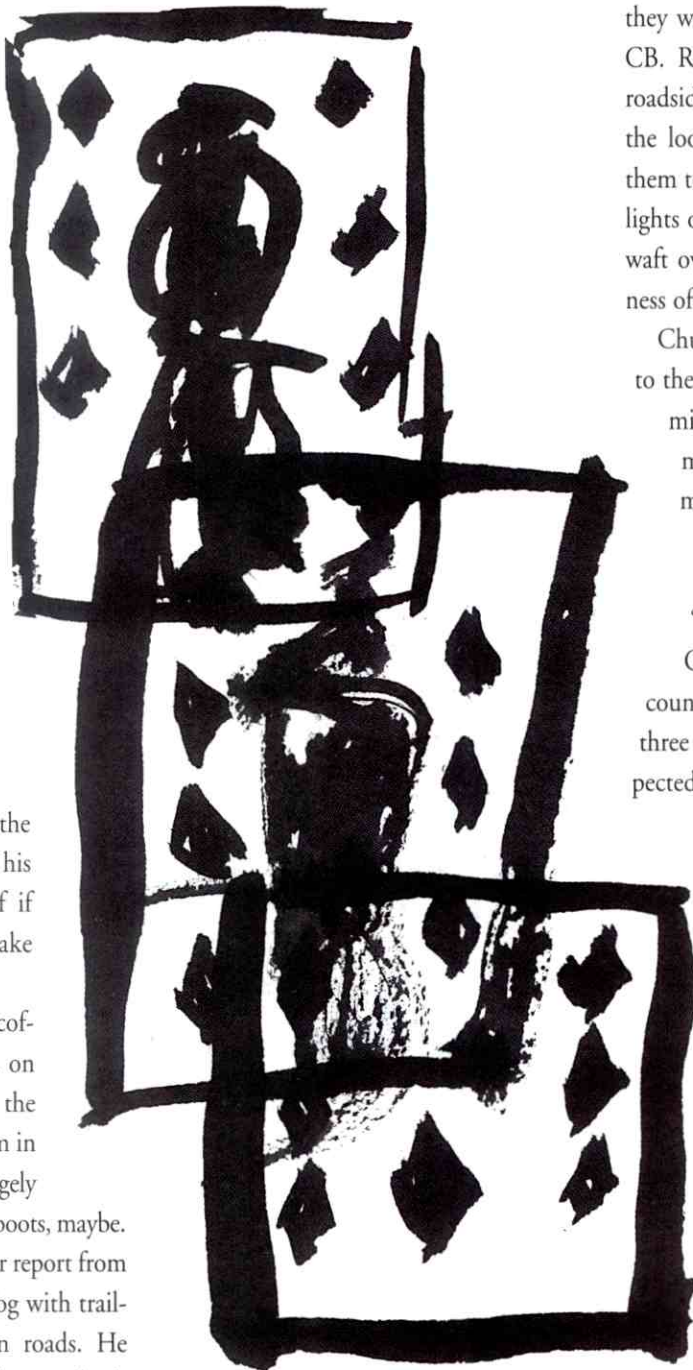
His shift started in fifteen minutes. He got up quickly, ignoring the imposing air of his adversary, who said, "I'm paying."



The door had swollen with the rain; he had to push it with his shoulder. He asked himself if the squeaking would wake Patricia or the little girl.

He found a thermos of coffee on the table; he turned on the light at the booth and the mike. The man followed him in with steps that vibrated strangely on the wood. The snakeskin boots, maybe.

He listened to the weather report from San Vicente Piedra: dense fog with trailers parked along mountain roads. He thought of the intruder's endurance (suddenly he seemed like an intruder). How long before the coke wore off? Did he have more with him? He saw his shiny fingernails, with their black half-moons. Under the light of the bare bulb, his eyes looked yellowish; his eyelashes were stiff, like scrub brush bristles. He scratched his chest again. Radio imagined desert insect bites,



bites of animals that pierced the skin to deposit their eggs, stingers that injected slow poisons. Maybe in a couple of hours Chuy Mendoza would faint away over the bottle caps he had put on the table.

Truckers rarely had northern accents; they talked another way over the air, as if

they wanted to prove something on the CB. Radio guided a truck toward the roadside at kilometer 140 and another to the lookout at kilometer 167. He told them to spend the night there with their lights on. Once in a while a song would waft over the airwaves, the infinite sadness of the Bukis.

Chuy Mendoza paid close attention to the messages coming from the transmitter, as though he were watching a movie backwards. How many times must he have spoken to him?

"You come around here much?"

"Whenever necessary. Your turn."

"How much are we betting?"

Chuy brought out some dollars, counted them parsimoniously and left three bills on the table. Radio had expected a higher bet.

In a pool of silence, as they looked at their cards as though each one had two messages, something creaked in the bedroom. Maybe Patricia was having a nightmare. The woman's dreams reached them like squeaks in the wood.

Radio served coffee, more to warm up his hands on the zinc cup than because he wanted something to drink.

"You got a shot?" Chuy Mendoza put down five dia-

monds.

He looked in the cupboard. The bottle was behind two bags of flour. He served it in a glass that had held a votive candle.

The man drank it quickly.

"Pure shit!" he said in praise. He rubbed the cross on the bottom of the glass.

A rig that identified itself as Mary Jane wanted to cross no matter what. The driver talked like he cleaned his teeth with diesel fuel: he *had* to get to the border before dawn.

"Those bastards have a date with their girlfriend," said Chuy.

Radio was familiar with the smugglers' shifts, too. The girlfriends carried army regulation .45s, wore leather boots, strong aftershave, dark glasses and accepted bribes on a fixed schedule. If the prospective boyfriend arrived late, lots of things could happen to him, but none of them got him to the Other Side.

Disappointed girlfriends were the best police: they took their revenge by slashing seat covers and letting the air out of tires in their quest for heavy drugs.

In the mountains everybody talked about the altar, the suitor, the inevitable altar boy and customs as a negotiable courtship. There was a curious respect in this symbolism: the men bribed were not whores; they might be girlfriends who were bitches-from-Hell, but never whores.

Mary Jane finally stopped when he got very high up. They could hear the metallic snore of the gearshift that seemed to drop down from sixth into fifth. The rig went off onto the gravel shoulder of the 236. It was as though something had swallowed him up there: absolute silence with the CB on, and then the melody of a harmonica, a pitiful sound, of rails lost in the night.

"The girlfriend won't be getting her serenade," said Chuy Mendoza, like anyone would have. From the time he walked into La Polar he had done nothing more interesting than win with astounding consistency. His fingernails drummed the table. Radio poured the rest of the liquor.

They went through a period of low, non-matching cards, in which two of a kind seemed like a victory.

"Misery won out over poverty," said Chuy, as he lost a hand. "Where do you get this shit?"

Guadalupe got the liquor in metal drums and poured it into bottles with a funnel. The man was fascinated by the bad taste of the stuff.

The light in the room made it impossible to see out. On clear days, Nuevo Terrales seemed very close, but the curves in the road made it about 10 hours away. As a child, Radio had watched broken-down tractor-trailers drive by. He remembered his surprise at the first refrigerator truck that went in to bring out strawberries from the Bajío. The mountains had been the same; the only things that changed were what went through them. Now the light craft airfield on the other side of the border, the weather station, the radio shack, the rigs' nocturnal ramblings (there were hardly any cars on this road bereft of cities) all depended on radar and invisible waves. Radio didn't know the owners of the weather station; he didn't even know who paid him to keep watch over the nocturnal crossings. A pick-up truck, never driven by the same man, brought him bills tied together with a rubber band. Sometimes dollars were mixed in with pesos and they had a trace of perfume, as though they had come from the girlfriends from customs. Every once in a while they raised the rate, showing that there was some kind of order, that someone was interested in the landing strips and the transportation of the merchandise. Nobody in Terrales knew how much money traveled the narrow highways where the fir trees made green

tunnels. Guadalupe thought they were dealing in fortunes, but she liked to imagine the worst: the truth was always worse. The drug traffickers were the lifeblood of the town and the Mountain Pass station. "The sultans of swing move everything; we're their hired help," she said of her far-off benefactors with equal parts hatred and admiration.

Radio won a pair of hands; maybe that was the only system for games of chance: not concentrating, letting your attention wander.

"I'm going to piss." Chuy got up to break the winning streak.

Radio went out with him. They pissed toward the edge; the smell of the ceders in the fog wafted toward them. The streams of piss fell as though into a bottomless chasm. Could the mandrake be something that only existed in very low places?

A call from a rig took Radio back to the booth. Maybe the other guy used the opportunity to bring out a line of cocaine. In any case, when he came back into the room he looked just as alert and tired as before.

"What's your limit?" He put a finger on the star on a bottle top. "You want to up the ante three zeros?"

In La Polar, a proposal like that would have stopped all conversation. But here, with your head full of badly shuffled cards and rigs dotted along the shoulders of the highway (their lights blinking like a lost constellation), that amount began to seem possible. Chuy Mendoza considered it with quiet care, as though he were examining a motor that he didn't want to take apart yet.

Radio watched the hands that picked up the cards. He became physically aware,

as though a second weariness pressed on the back of his neck, that Mendoza knew about his discovery and had come to play for it. That was the only possible explanation for the bet. The wooden rooms, the badger skin nailed on a wall, the kerosene lamp on the kitchen table next to a cereal box and two non-matching spoons, the old-fashioned microphone (a World War II relic that surprisingly still worked), the gasoline drums next to the door with the chicken wire all made a single hand like the one the visitor was proposing absurd. From that moment on, it was also logical.

"We still have two hours left." That's what Chuy had come for, for the fog to close them in until sunrise. The speaker emitted the static that meant the others were sleeping. Radio asked himself if the other guy was acting alone or if he had been sent. Maybe a pair of distant hands, with impossibly luxurious rings described by Guadalupe, had found a way of getting to him. It would have been easier to send him one of the debt collectors that traveled the mountains, who could bury him in any ravine. Why condition the recovery to a hand of cards? Only then, with uncomfortable surprise, did he realize he could still win. If he did, how would Mendoza pay him? The snakeskin boots and the gold animal spoke of better days, but the sheepskin vest, the weariness kept at bay with coke or bennies, the broken nails, suggested a cornered destiny. Maybe he had planned the meeting for months; maybe he went up and down the mountains talking to Radio, the insects staining his windshield a thousand times; his left forearm marked by the unending La Quemada straight-away; he kept his appointments at the

customs checks, became one with his weariness until from his obstinate crossing came the way to get at what the radio shack hid, the secret of the hills where the gas stations ended.

Radio studied Chuy Mendoza's voice; when the Thorton had turned over, another rig was behind it, and he stopped it with the stock phrase, "We've got a stranger." Then he put on a slicker, took a dark lantern to go out into the storm and search for the remains of the Thorton. Meanwhile, somebody was waiting a few kilometers away, at the "deer curve." But how did he know that alongside the broken bodies of the driver and his helper was the metal box? Maybe it took him a while to make the connection; he also found out much later that the Quemada dog track had lost a fortune (the money they sent to the Other Side to buy dogs with). When he asked Guadalupe, she added dirty details: the real business was in dog fights. For some reason, he felt relieved that the metal box came from a game of chance; the greyhounds had run for that; those unknown fighting dogs had cut each other to ribbons for that. However, he opened it only once and didn't count the bills. He searched for a way of talking about the money to Patricia. He didn't find one. He kept the box in the shed, 200 meters from the radio shack. His father had spend his last years there, doing nothing but smoke marihuana and look at the horizon. "This room is little on the inside and enormous on the outside," he used to say, meaning the vastness that surrounded it. The window dominated the valley, the small craft airfield, the highway with its dotted line where he had waited for the return of an out-of-date car, the Valiant that would close the circle.

Radio could barely remember the years when his parents had a bungalow with two rooms for rent in Terrales. Only very rarely did a traveler decide to spend the night there. Strictly speaking, the only thing left to him from that time was an obsessive scene in his head. He had gone over it so many times, adding exact, harmful details that came to him with growing realism, as though he had witnessed it at different ages. The bungalow was a fuzzy background, but the kitchen light was on. The bald guy was wearing a basketball T-shirt; it was summer and a circle of sweat covered his swollen belly. He must have been about 50; his chest was covered with grey hair; on the back of his hands, his hair was still red. He smiled relentlessly at nothing, as though stupidity were a gift that should be shared. He stayed with them three days, an eternity in that place of transience. He killed time making little men out of match sticks. Maybe he knew his mother from before; in any case in the memory, the guy became a guest with no reason to be there, who twisted matches all day long until that night in the kitchen came. The most outstanding thing was his physical decline: the whitish arms, the asthmatic breathing, the bald spot shining with sweat, the idiot smile; and yet he had been able to lay his mother out on the kitchen table. Unbearable slowly, Radio remembered the hands with red hair taking off her panties, her legs up in the air, the absurd high heels on the man's neck, and that face full of the indescribable surrender. It wasn't the dispassionate contact, the unburdening of two lonely people in the mountains, the uncomplicated help of Guadalupe, but an uncommunicable joy, as though his

mother's young body hoped for nothing else than to be penetrated on that table. Maybe something was wrong with the memory; maybe Radio ruined it on purpose to make her later running away worse; in any case, the head that turned to see him was real; the eyes that opened suddenly were real: his mother discovered him in the hallway and that was what decided her to leave. She would not have been able to stand the witness of her best night on the mountain growing up with her. The next day she left the house with a leather suitcase. The man was waiting for her next to the Valiant. He came up to her and tried to take her by the waist. She shook him off and got into the car.

Enough years had gone by for Radio to be able to review the scene coldly: Why hadn't they turned off the kitchen light? Everything had an overexposed tone: the too-white skin, the shining sweat, the flower printed dress, the shoes rimmed with mud, the match stick man that fell to the floor, the table with a nail about to fall out. If the nail had fallen out, his father would have awakened and saved himself the next 20 years with a shotgun with one round for everybody, his gaze fixed on the highway.

On the wall of the shed there was a picture of her smiling, a little bit like the way the bald man did. It was a retouched color portrait: the eyes were so black, they were blue, and the cheeks the color of raspberries. His memory of the kitchen looked like that photo.

When Radio would go to the shed for some tool, he would glance at the portrait. It seemed unbelievable that this woman, younger than he was

now and retouched with fake colors, could have lived there. He had eaten of that body.

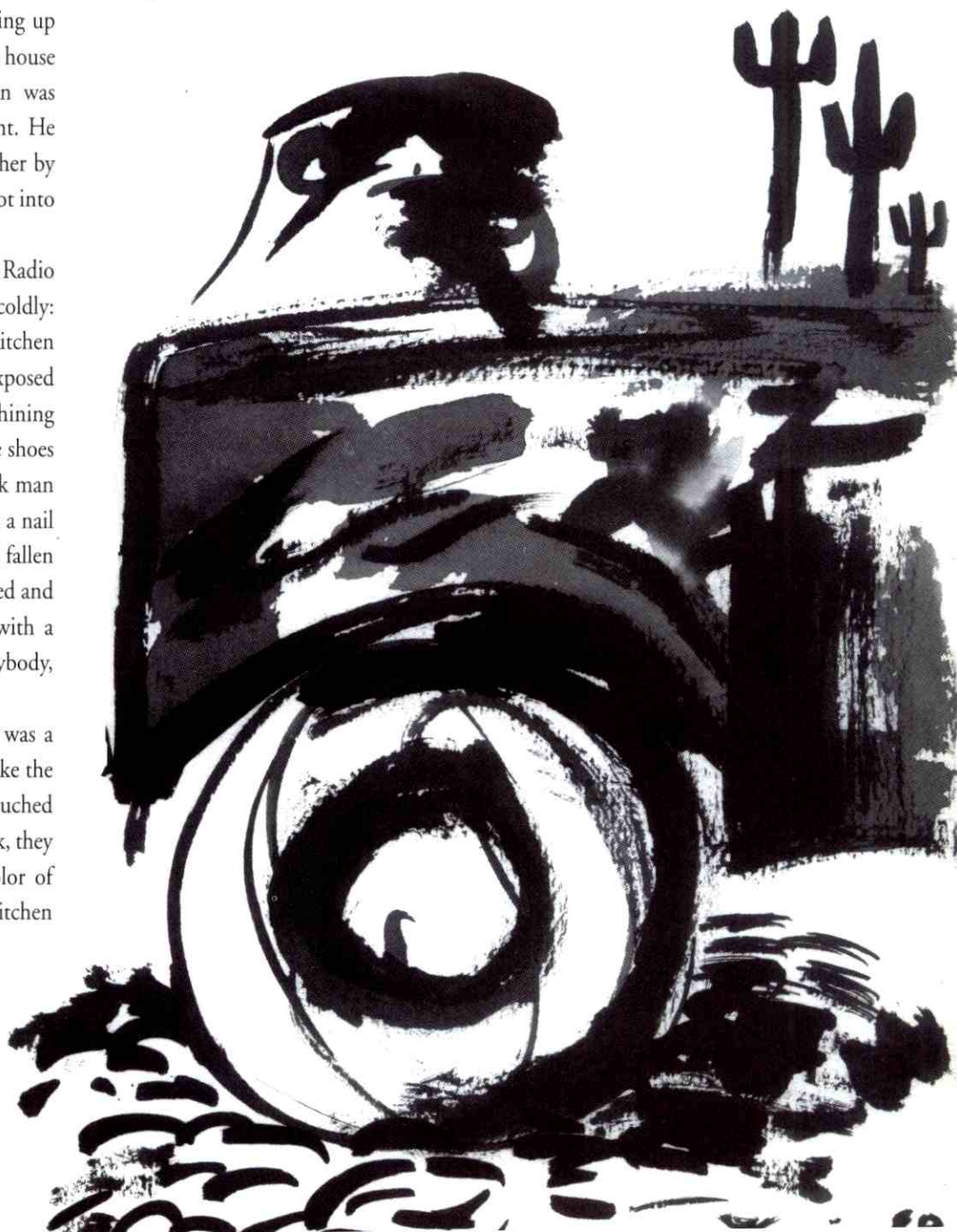
His father died in his sleep, facing the window, the "big" part of his house. Sometimes, Radio imagined that he had died with the shotgun on his knee. Then he got rid of that obvious thought. He died placidly, as though such a long wait had been another way of getting revenge.

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They heard steps, Patricia's feet on the wood.

The woman leaned in the doorway, uncomfortably, her face softly swollen with sleep, her hair in her eyes.

"It's really cold!" She always said that and then walked around barefoot as though she didn't know she was in Mountain Pass.





She was wearing a light blue slip that barely covered her. She took a few steps and curled up on a stool. Radio saw her toes, where the skin changed color and became very white.

He went for a blanket into the room where the little girl was sleeping. In the shadows, he could see a soft drink bottle. The pillow smelled of eucalyptus compresses. The first contact he had with Patricia had been the beautiful little girl who smiled through the chicken wire door informing him that her car “was broke.”

From the first night she slept with him and shouted his name and became the only person that didn't call him

Radio, Patricia left him hot words in his ear, “Come on.” But she stayed where she was and got a job in the fiberglass plant, 15 kilometers from Terrales. Radio had seen the smoke rising in the distance. Guadalupe said the job poisoned you, and little crystal slivers formed in your lungs. Patricia worked with a surgeon's mask over her mouth spraying substances with a hose. He liked to imagine her behind the clouds of spray. Somehow, she looked at things as though through a vaporous substance, a wire mesh, a filter that allowed her to be where she didn't want to be.

The accident with the Thorton happened a few weeks after Patricia began to

make the house inhabitable and to say she wanted them to leave. He agreed, thinking of a sand oval, perfectly illuminated, where fast dogs decided your luck and then, as though something totally unrelated, thinking of the bills he hadn't counted. He rejected the idea of using the money, not knowing quite how; slowly something just took him over and prevented him from telling Patricia. Everything took on the form of a bitter secret. Patricia wanted so badly to go away that the box hidden in the shed became the hope he betrayed without her knowing it.

Radio spread the blanket over Patricia. He watched her smile as though



she were dreaming something good and non-transferrable. He went back to the game. He almost felt relief when he picked up the three spades. "Terrales," he said to himself. He asked for two cards. With slow monotony, he matched every bet Mendoza made. He lost the hand and looked over at the window caressed by the fog. The CB produced a wordless hiss. How many nights had he stayed up next to a thermos of coffee, squashing crumbs on the table, memorizing batting averages, dealing out the cards for solitaire? Somebody had to stay awake so the others could go through. It was that simple. That was the meaning of the murmuring of the loudspeaker, and his eyes on a window where the only thing visible was dark vapor.

After hours of silence, the first voice sounded strange on the loudspeaker. "You got a rig up there?"

Chuy Mendoza scratched his chest. Radio looked him in the eyes. Chuy nodded his head no.

"No," he said "Why?"

He recognized the voice. They were calling him from the weather station.

"There's a guy off the route. He went through Terrales. Any strangers?"

"Nothing."

The man dealt the cards, not thanking him for the lie. Was somebody watching him? Was somebody waiting for him to come down with the box? His yellowish eyes bored into Radio.

"How much is left?" He pointed to his bottle caps, an overwhelming advantage.

What was worse, losing the valley, the neon lights, the open life he could go down to with Patricia, or her never knowing about the whole treasure in the metal box? It was like he was betting the woman's

dream. When she opened her eyes, she would come back into the poor room, to the things she thought to leave behind and yet improved.

He had to go for a bag of bottle caps with holes in them that had been used as washers for nails. It would have been easier to just give them to him, but the ritual continued and he lost one game after another, until they didn't need to add the scores up anymore.

"Where have you got it?" asked Chuy Mendoza.

The grayish light licked the window. In a few minutes the rigs would turn on their motors and ask for signals to be able to go back on the road.

They went out into the cool air. They took the packed dirt path that led to the shed.

Radio pushed the door and breathed in the dust. He looked out the window. The fog was rising. He saw the distant highway, its dotted line.

The box was under the portrait of his mother, next to the shotgun. Was it loaded? It seemed odd not to know.

"Here," he said taking off the blanket the box was wrapped in, opening the top. "I didn't even count it." The bills looked stiff, scratchy, as though they had been printed during the night.

The man left the shack indifferently, like a collector of lost boxes in the mountains. After a few minutes, Radio heard the rig's motor.

He looked at the photo on the wall, the wine-colored sweater, the weak body he had eaten of, the young woman he wouldn't recognize when she came back to Terrales, because she was going to come back, maybe only for a

few minutes, enough to verify a part of her life, or, like so many others, to show that you could stop at this lost point on the map.

He went to the window. The land lay as though its vastness were an opportunity. The lights of the landing strip went out one by one, like gold beads. He put his fingers to his nose; they had a metallic smell from pushing bottle caps so much.

The shed was the last lookout point on the mountain. He asked himself what would happen if someone, somewhere, could see him standing there. Would they know why he was there? Would they understand what a match stick man and three spades meant? Would they imagine Patricia's mouth, abandoned to what changed during her dream? Would they feel the same way he did? Would they think that he had lost or won something? Would they understand what began when people ran out of gas? **MM**

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> This is the title story of a book of short stories soon to be published by Alfaguara.

