

# CAPTIVE CHILDHOOD

Alejandro Paniagua Anguiano\*  
Illustrated by Martín Pech\*\*

Seated on the rug, Alfonso plays. He shudders at his own imagination.

The boy snaps open the second-to-last of his matryoshka dolls but finds a rescue note instead of the smallest doll, the one he likes the most—with the black dress embellished with thirteen red flowers, crimson cheeks taking up half her face, and lips painted on so precisely that she always seems to be blowing a kiss.

The frightened little boy reads the note warning him that Svetlana Patrovna will only return if he cooperates and doesn't talk to any officials or G.I. Joes, and especially not to any toy soldiers. Alfonso can feel the training wheels being yanked from his heart—now teetering and tottering as it seeks out some father figure who might help, right before crashing hopelessly against the floor.



The tot shakes his chewing-gum-filled cell phone and trills his lips to make the sound of a ringing phone.

He picks up.

Someone tells him he's got to hand over 13 million dollars in cash if he wants to see Svetlana Patrovna again. The boy doesn't say a word, but, in his mind, he can hear the cries of all the wailing dolls in the world.

He's paralyzed for a full hour, stiff as a Barbie's lifeless eyes, tense as the flaxen hair on a Playmobil toy.

An envelope with ribbons printed along the borders is delivered to the room. Inside, there's a card with the birthday wishes scratched out. Instructions for the handover have been scribbled next to the chocolate-cake illustration, and there's a bunch of red splintered wood glued to the card. The kidnapper scratched off one of Svetlana's cheeks and sent the scrapings.

The boy gives in.

\* Alejandro is a writer and poet; he can be contacted at @APaniagua\_.

\*\* Martín is a visual artist; he can be contacted at @martipech8.

He pulls out the Monopoly bills that haven't been lost over the years.

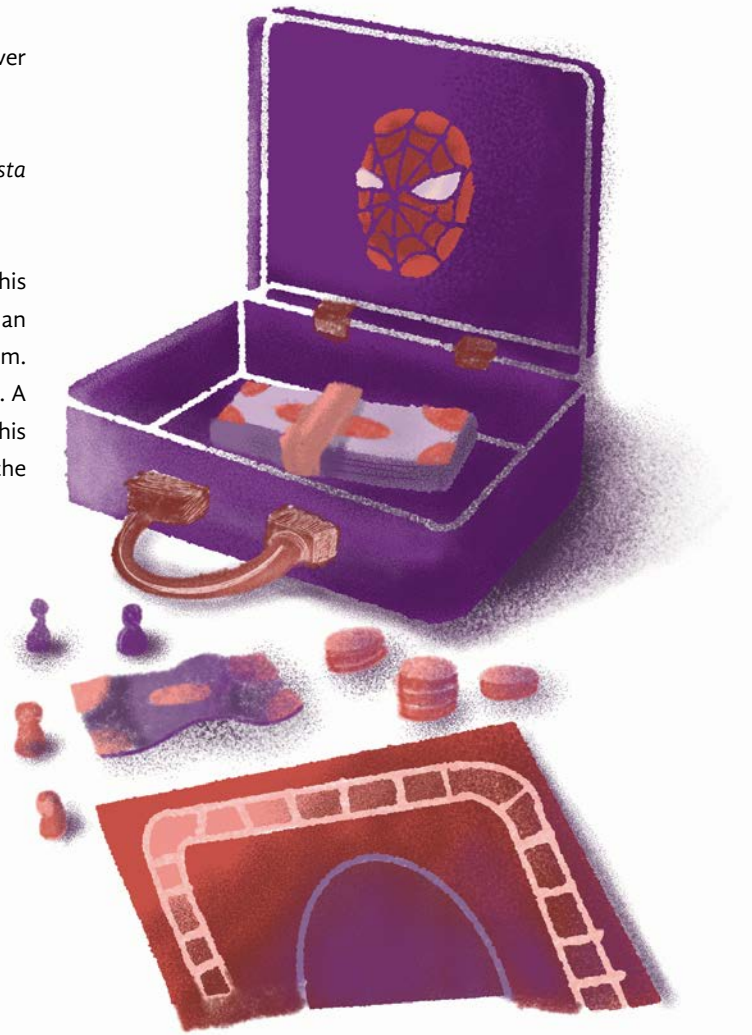
There aren't enough.

He'll have to get the rest of the money from his *Turista Mundial* board game.

He ekes out the total.

He places the money in a Spiderman lunchbox, makes his way to the bathroom, and leaves the ransom inside. With an awful pain in his stomach, the youngster returns to his room.

The minutes and hours go by. The paper planes go by. A trash truck goes by. The X Men on the television screen (his favorite cartoon) go by. A real plane goes by. His stomachache is now gone, too.



Alfonso heads back to the bathroom. Quivering, he props open one of the mirror-cabinet panes and, inside, at last, he finds his matryoshka doll, Svetlana Patrovna. He plants a kiss on her forehead and safely stores her in his pants pocket. He toys with the feeling of happiness.

But the boy's feigned happiness won't last long.

He walks over to his sister's room and barely opens the door. The girl's toys, which Alfonso had always found annoying, now fill him with tender longing.

Her scent lingers in the room despite her absence.

With a heavy heart, the boy looks at his father, who has fallen asleep on the girl's bed again. A purple bed that can't hold an adult. Alfonso closes the door. For a few seconds, he closes his eyes. Then, one by one, he closes up his Russian dolls. **MM**