

María Sonia CRISTOFF
Three novel excerpts

Deceptive Calm
a journey through ghost towns of Patagonia
(Foreword)

In spite of the fact my father was born in the middle of Patagonia, everyone around him spoke Bulgarian. My grandfather had managed to avoid the inevitable job in the oil industry that awaited most of his émigré compatriots, and had bought himself a stronghold near the River Chubut, where the Welsh colony had settled. There, on the pretext of farming, he spent his time refounding his very own Bulgaria and eventually succeeded in assembling the animals, the rhythms of harvests and rains, the yoghurt my Grandmother used to make, the magazines in Cyrillic and the Bulgarian friends who used to visit him now and again—all perfectly cloned. When my father left the stronghold to play football with friends from the neighboring farms he knew that the rules consisted of kicking the ball hard and speaking that other language his blond friends spoke: he could already as a little boy get by pretty well with his wasteground Welsh. Then he'd go home, where no one spoke very much at all—or spoke Bulgarian. One day, when my grandparents reckoned he was six, they took him to a nearby village, Gaiman, and sat him on a school bench. From his vantage point, my father took a good look around and realized that many of the children—virtually all in fact—were speaking a third language. It was nothing like the ones he knew. It was Spanish.

In his blind obstinacy, my grandfather had signed up for the venture to refound the fatherland on Patagonian soil that so many others had attempted before him—from entrepreneurs like the Frenchman Antoine de Tounens, who had tried to establish the Kingdom of Araucanía and Patagonia in the Andes, or the Romanian Iuliu Popper, who went so far as to mint coins and laws of his own for his colony in Tierra del Fuego, to the forebears, according to some, of the Welsh children my father used to play football with. But, as you can see, my grandfather's Little Bulgaria couldn't keep one of the most pronounced of Patagonian traits at bay: the isolation. When I was a girl, I saw isolation as a very good thing, as had many European explorers in Patagonia: to them it had meant the chance to extend their domains; to me it meant being in a place that subverted my routine—timetables, mealtimes, smells were different from those of my everyday life in a nearby town, and no one asked me how I was doing at school. It was only later as a teenager that the isolation began to feel like something negative, as it had to the nineteenth-century Argentine explorers. To them it had been the threat of the indomitable, of the territory that had held out against becoming part of the fledgling nation; for me it had begun to be what distanced me from the country where things happened, the people I wanted to meet, the books I wanted to read. It was a quality that transformed Patagonia into a place of some nightmarish logic, where I could walk and walk and never move from the same place. Argentine strategists had failed in many of their plans for the South, but they had been very effective in propagating the idea that Argentine life was concentrated in Buenos Aires. And so, in the early 1980s, I left.

I returned twenty years later, when I no longer took one view or the other and time had led me to conclude that, personal history aside, isolation was there in every piece of writing I'd found on Patagonia. And I mean everything, although this doesn't feel like the time or the place to start listing them. I went back to write a feature on this eminently Patagonian trait. I wanted to see what forms it takes today, to find it at its farthest extremes, and so I started to look for towns that for one reason or another—not just the ones in the censuses—might be described as ghost towns. I meticulously selected them first, then visited the places and hung around there. I had endless hours to visit towns that could be seen in one. I sat on a corner watching the dogs going by. I gave myself up completely to that state of torpor produced by an excess of light or wind or silence. There were days I felt as if I was on a science fiction set being sucked up by some

powerful, not entirely definable force. I saw things, lots of things: a ghost town isn't an empty town. Sitting there, almost without asking or moving, without making any effort, I became a kind of lightning rod, a receiving antenna. The stories came to me, the atmosphere worked on me like a ventriloquist. From it emerged the double voice that relates what follows: I tried to be in control at all times but there are moments, I have to admit, when the atmosphere speaks through me.

(2005)

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Misfits, novella
(Chapter One)

Lately I've been sleeping when and where I can: twenty-five minutes on a subway journey; one and a quarter hours on the bus; forty minutes at a corner table in a bar (wearing dark glasses and propping myself up against the wall with dignity so I won't be woken up, or thrown out); an hour or two at my desk hugging the monitor; two or three hours in bed. This spell of insomnia began with the appearance of the new neighbors. There are two specimens, male and female, and their sexual behavior is very odd: despite being a couple, they have sex daily and have it always—absolutely always—at the same time. More specifically, at three in the morning. And I'm not exaggerating when I say, more specifically, at ear-level. Even though I live in one of those PHs in San Telmo, famed for their old, thick walls. The first stage of living with this sexual habit of my neighbors', I must admit, was positive. It breathed fresh life into the sex in my marriage and restored my faith in marriage in general. Then, I think after the first month was up, my sex and faith levels returned to the same old rut. I began to find my neighbors' habits first invasive, then insufferable. I decided we had to switch bedrooms, but there's no such thing in refurbished San Telmo PHs, where everything, except the bathroom and the study, is part of a single, gregarious living space. The only option open to us was to set up the sofa bed in my study and sleep there. So I started sleeping in the place where I spent the whole day working. I wound up being enclosed by the same four walls day and night. On top of that, my study faced the access corridor for the other San Telmo PHs, which meant that my other neighbors were stamping their heels in my ear at all hours of the night and the janitor was sweeping his broom in my ear at six in the morning. So we had to return to the mezzanine we called our bedroom. It was a calamitous time. They—the frisky neighbors—no longer woke me up at three in the morning: I'd wake up by myself at two thirty, as if I were in charge of organizing preventive measures to deal with the imminent catastrophe. I'd jam the door shut with heavy furniture, stack any books or files I might have left on the floor up on the table, put crosses of packing tape on the window panes (I'd been taught how at school when I lived in the South, to prepare for attacks by the Brits during the Falklands War), switch off the light. Such measures, I realized as time passed, would have been extremely useful in response to earthquakes, wars or floods. I decided to send them a letter. I wrote a few lines in which I made reference to rules of politeness, laws of cohabitation, the need for rest, and I even slipped in something about respect for privacy. It was a collection of euphemisms, writing more geared to featuring in a rulebook than to exerting an influence over someone's behavior. I gave my name and telephone number, and slid it under the big iron door that served as the street entrance to the adjacent building, where there were three—also refurbished—PHs. According to my calculations, the noise was coming from apartment 2. Right away—the next day I think—I got a call from my neighbor. The string of euphemisms got longer and longer: she didn't understand, I said it wasn't a question of understanding, she said she'd already received complaints about the noise from the refurbishments, I said I wasn't talking about refurbishments, she said lately she'd had mandarin peel thrown from the neighboring building and she didn't think it was the right way to go about solving problems, I said I didn't live in that building and that anyhow I don't eat mandarins, she still didn't

understand, I said it wasn't a question of understanding but of not making a noise in the middle of the night, she said the workmen never worked at that time and besides, she repeated, she didn't understand what I was talking about. I'm talking about sex, I decided to tell her before we got back to the mandarins, etc. She went quiet for a few seconds, as though I'd made her a proposition. I wish it up to were me, then she sighed and said she was eight months pregnant. I took it that the solution didn't lie in the epistolary genre and called an architect. He suggested building a double wall with insulating material inbetween. The method was expensive and he couldn't guarantee that it would infallible: to do that he'd have to build a double wall in my neighbors' house as well. I didn't want to go through the whole thing of getting the wrong house again. The sleepless nights continued. Not long ago we hit upon the name of an expert in acoustics. An undisputed authority, said the person who recommended him to us. It took us a while to track down his phone number, and a while longer to arrange for him come to the house and study the case. That was what he said: study the case. To know what it was we were talking about he not only needed to check out the quality of the walls, but to hear some kind of sound from the other side. But there was no sound to be heard except at three in the morning. So he'd have to come one day at three in the morning.

He showed up last week. No sooner had he walked in and seen how solid the walls were than he looked at me as if convinced the sounds were in my head. The expert had that combination of thinness and agility you find in a good many obsessives, as if consumed and enthused with equal intensity. He headed straight for the dividing wall and began to run his palms over the surface, as enraptured as a child touching the sand he's going use to build a castle, his smooth, electrified fingers suddenly tightened into a fist from which protruded determined knuckles capable apparently of producing the perfect tap. We didn't utter a word: I even carefully put down the cup of linden tea I was drinking so as not to interfere with the circulation of sounds. We invited him up to the mezzanine, where, as I'd already explained to him, the noises could be heard more accurately. The three of us sat down on the bed; it had just gone two thirty in the morning. But what if that particular night something—an illness, a fight, some trace of normality—prevented this pair of specimens from copulating? Suddenly I saw the three of us there, like those photographers subsidized by National Geographic that have to spend days and days behind a tree waiting for the exact moment the crocodile opens its mouth to eat the antelope that just happened to go for a drink of water. What would be the limit of the expert's endurance? Would he leave at three thirty in the morning, or would he, like National Geographic photographers, be willing to leave only once he'd achieved his objective? Would we have days, weeks of cohabitation with the expert? Would there be any possibility of pitching a tent in a San Telmo PH? The first groans snapped me out of such anxious deliberations. I breathed a sigh of relief. The expert glued his ear—always the left, I wonder why—to the wall and, as the noises grew louder, he muttered a few phrases among which I managed, a couple of times, to catch the word “interesting.” Now that he had his sample, that he'd finished his fieldwork, so to speak, I thought we could go downstairs so that he could explain the case to us. I think I asked him whether he'd like a cup of linden tea, but he gestured to me to be quiet and whispered something about the importance of comparing the different intensities. At the final groans and shrieks he turned his head slowly from side to side, as dogs do when they hear a sound they find particularly intriguing but can't quite work out. Interesting, interesting, he kept saying as he went down the stairs. Time—or rather the things that happen over time: essentially refurbishments and traffic, he clarified later, downstairs, when he agreed to a cup of black coffee—gradually causes a displacement of strata and creates a sort of zigzag network of channels along which sound can travel. Even with walls as thick and solid as these, how interesting. Or something like that I think he said. It was four thirty in the morning when he finished his explanation; I was on my seventh cup of linden tea of the night and I think I was already entering my fourth month of sustained insomnia. He promised to write us a report by this Thursday, providing a description of the case and listing some suggestions. I don't want suggestions or reports, I want solutions. We aren't part of a referral committee, we're a couple of desperate neighbors, I was about to say to him but suddenly, through my drowsiness, I saw the entire sequence of events: first I shook him, then I flung myself round his neck in the kind of defeat you can only feel when faced with

what you think is your last resort—and I held back. Acoustics, please remember, he said on the front door step on his way out, is not an exact science. The phrase has been buzzing round my head ever since. It's two days until Thursday. Meanwhile I go on sleeping when and where I can.

I wake up on a bench at the zoo. The nearest one, the one in Buenos Aires: I always come here when I can see everything's out of joint and there's just no understanding it. Human beings seem remote and incomprehensible to me. I curl up somewhere between the cages like one of the animals, and my mind is placated. I discovered it a few years ago, quite a few, on my way home from the theater. No matter how good the play is, going to the theater invariably makes the left side of my face itch. The first stage of the itch is internal, so to speak, which forces me to scratch myself by making highly sophisticated movements with my tongue and my throat muscles, a minimalist performance, although no one can appreciate it. Just the opposite, I get elbowed. I'm then forced to use my nails to scratch the outside—my cheek and, more insistently, the left corner of my mouth. I always come out with my face a mess. The vestiges of coagulated blood, commonly known as scabs, take at least a week to go. To add to the itchy face there's my irritation: I still don't know which comes first and which follows. What I do know is that, at the end of the play, when I have to greet some acquaintance or other, I'm always in the throes of both torments at their peak. The specific day I'm referring to, the one when I discovered the soothing power of the zoo, I was in an extreme state: I'd been to see a piece of dance-theater. Don't ask me why I subject myself to these things, don't ask. The point is that on the way out of the dance-theater show, as they say, I ran into my then boss—don't ask about him either—who was accompanied by some self-proclaimed writer I'd had a row with a few days earlier. My boss whispered in my ear that the least I could do to make amends for my misdeed was to go and have a drink with them. We went to one of those bars on Corrientes Avenue that always make me feel nostalgia for a street I never knew or an aversion for the one I do, and I ordered a sparkling mineral water: I thought the bubbles in my throat might continue the work interrupted by the elbows. My boss wasn't pleased, I could see from the way he was looking at me. I wondered if he expected me to order a gin and tonic or one of those playboy-style drinks à la Isidoro Cañones, or whether it was because by now he'd already guessed I often drink sparkling water to try and digest what I can't stand. The self-proclaimed writer began to talk about the work—as he called what we'd just seen—and about his work—as he called his books. My then boss responded with his typical wisdom saying, when he feels like it, what the other person wants to hear, and shot me an occasional glance with a fury that, he seemed to be saying, could only be placated by some intervention on my part. I attempted a couple of comments that led nowhere. After the first hour, I was no longer capable of paying attention to anything other than the left corner of my mouth, which was stinging, and my right eye, which had started to twitch. Their wives were talking about another play, so there was no haven to be found there either. I began to feel trapped in one of those wells of silence I fall into while everything, absolutely everything around me seems banal and hostile. I ordered another bottle of sparkling water. They went on talking—I mean you couldn't call it conversation—while I sank deeper and deeper. My left side, where the scabs still hadn't had time to form, had begun to drip blood. I felt like some apocryphal virgin crying tears of blood in a bar on Corrientes.

At that moment, when it seemed there was no space left in my head for anything but to confirm the habitual certainty that nothing makes sense and try a series of lines that might help me get out of there as soon as possible, at that exact moment, somehow, from somewhere a plan emerged: the next day as soon as I got up, I'd go to the zoo. Who can say how these things work, but for me it was a kind of a dictation, a message. I'd been living in Buenos Aires for over ten years by then and it had never occurred to me to go to the zoo. The next day I woke up with one of those existential hangovers I get sometimes: overwhelmed, fed up, convinced I'm not in a bed but on a hospital stretcher, frozen, sterilized, my chest weighed down by one of those metallic machines I always associate with the word x-ray and low-budget World War II movies. I can't move, not even to curl up in a ball, and I get the feeling that my arms and legs are much thinner and whiter than

they really are. The body of a deportee, I think to myself. On that very morning, the one I'm talking about, my deliberations were soon interrupted by the memory of the previous night's plan. I threw on the first thing I could find and went to the zoo, which was near the apartment where I was living at the time. In the elevator mirror I discovered that the scabs had already started forming. When I arrived at the zoo, I began walking along the paths, also guided, I suppose, by the same voice that had dictated the plan to me the night before, and as I walked between the enclosed and domesticated animals, I began to feel the weight lift from my chest. Not from the effects of contemplation, that was for sure, but rather identification. I wasn't the only one who was a misfit, who was out of place. Ever since then, every time I get into one of those states, I race to the zoo. For Ishmael, who enlisted as a seaman whenever he felt sick of the world, the sea was a surrogate for a bullet. That is what he says at the start of *Moby Dick*. For me, the zoo is an antidote to my existential hangover.

(2006)

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Under the Influence

(from the opening)

It was a while between that time and the next. More than a month for sure. At their second encounter, Tonia crashed into him head on. It was one of those days she made a mental list on her way home of what she still had to finish and wondered how she'd manage to meet at least a couple of those deadlines. Suddenly she saw a set of keys and a pair of glasses flying through the air. It was a high impact collision. She mentioned to me on several occasions how strange it seemed to her not to have sensed anything sooner: an approaching arm or leg; maybe not an entire body in motion, but at least a part of it. Yet her account coincides with many survivors of road accidents: suddenly the other person was right there, like an apparition, showing just how late it was for any kind of maneuver. As soon as she'd recovered slightly, Tonia set about picking up the remains. The lenses of her glasses were shattered: not even such a thick, vintage frame had managed to save them. She stood there staring at them, not so much to unravel the mystery as to delay meeting the person who must have been behind all this. She took a deep breath, the way she'd learned to do on a recent course, and when she looked up she found him again. Cecilio Rave. Their only previous encounter was the one I already told you about, the day Tonia was standing entranced, almost hypnotized, in the middle of the sidewalk, though in actual fact she was just replaying the dialogue from a meeting the day before which she'd left feeling particularly upset and wanting to kill someone or other. That was what she was doing when she heard someone come up to her and ask her if she was so sure that the Tartars would be coming that way. That was how she met him. The quote sounded trite, she said, typical of those readers of great classics published in cheap reprints by Sunday newspapers. She turned her head, her whole body even, to answer with one of those acerbic comments of hers, one of those lines that are no less sharp for being brief, but in those eyes that struggled to declare their existence behind inordinately thick lenses, she saw something that told her she was dealing with someone who, quite literally, was waiting for the Tartars. Verbatim, she assured me. If there's one moment I can reproduce with complete accuracy, if there's at least one, it was definitely then, the first time she saw him. This second time, the day of the collision, he met her apologies with a beatific smile. Tonia put it down to the bewildering effect of the lack of glasses. Or

the loss of blood, which gushed out his nose like a waterfall on to his cotton t-shirt. For a second she was tempted to ask him if he could see the Tartars coming, but it didn't seem to be the right moment. Instead she improvised something resembling first aid. She dragged him as best she could to the florist's on the corner, where they employ an oriental woman who makes bouquets of flowers that restore your trust in everything. It's no exaggeration, I know her too. When she saw them arrive, the woman opened her almond eyes wide and, in an instant, cleared the mass of accumulated stuff from the counter so that Tonia could deposit the body there. With the same patience with which she's accustomed to assembling her bouquets, she began to remove the traces of blood from Cecilio. She used a white handkerchief. Tonia wondered whether anyone else nowadays would have a white linen handkerchief to hand. She also removed the remains of glass and dried mud. Human faces are full in indentations, unexpected edges. His features were still frozen into something resembling beatitude. Beneath the stain on his t-shirt it was possible to glimpse a lush landscape of blue and green. Tonia could see it read 'A Souvenir of Iguazú.' She thought it was a conciliatory slogan, that in fact he'd been asking for it. A bloody waterfall that the oriental lady was trying to stem as she hummed a song. Tonia's grip on the keys and the glasses was excessively tight, like a mountain climber's whose life depended on the contact between her hand and some tiny object. Cecilio said nothing; neither did they. The woman took some ice cubes out of a miniature refrigerator and put them in a transparent vase with water. At first the ice cubes sank slowly under the pressure of the water. Tonia thought the scene had something dreamlike about it, or else something reminiscent of a sporting celebration. Her attention wandered to the lines of cactus. She'd never seen that variety of opuntia before. The ones on her balcony weren't lasting the summer well. Too much direct sunlight, she thought. There are days when the midday sun is hotter there than in the Gobi desert. She must remember to buy fertilizer. There was a noise at the door. A lady put one foot inside the florist's but when she saw Cecilio's body she withdrew it, as from a pool of suspicious thermal waters: with a look of distrust or displeasure. The oriental woman had wrapped the handkerchief—which was no longer white but rather tomato red—around three or four ice cubes, and was running it over Cecilio's forehead. She continued to murmur the song that Tonia couldn't place. She supposed it must be from her country of origin, from her childhood full of ideograms and bright colors. She was about to ask her which country that was, but it didn't feel like the right moment. China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea? How reassuring it must be, she thought, to have something in one's features, one's skin color, one's accent, that unambiguously declares one's capacity as a foreigner. Had it not been for the number of things she still had to do, she assured me, she could have stayed there for hours, among flowers that never dry up, with that song being hummed in the background. At some point, the oriental woman smiled at her and handed the now vertical body of Cecilio over to her. He was smiling too. Tonia looked at them with a sort of envy, or intrigue. Working herself up into one of those vague lathers that could rapidly drive her into a panic, she asked Cecilio if he'd take her arm to walk to a taxi. There was no need to drive as his house was very close by, he said with a renewed ability to modulate, and left the main question unanswered.

Tonia's mother settles down in an armchair and tries, unsuccessfully, to contain a look of irritation. She glances at her watch, then looks out of the window. From that part of her house there's a perfect view of the River Plate and even the Uruguayan coast. She stares fixedly ahead. I don't know if she's wondering what the point of this idea she has had is—my telling her every detail of the last thing I'd heard about her daughter—or if she's planning her next weekend in Colonia.

During that journey, on which she accompanied him home—on his arm, like a married Italian couple—she noticed that Cecilio walked with an odd gait, as if each step involved resolving the indecision between his customary agility and his feigned fragility. They'd gone a hundred meters when he proposed a detour before arriving at his house to see whether the pain in his leg was going. It seemed excessive to Tonia; she sneaked a look at the time and thought that the leg business must have been added to the nose business when she dragged him to the florist's. She noticed that he spoke with a nasal twang, which surprised her: she established, by sneaking another look, that the woman from the florist's had put plugged his nostrils with cotton. Impossible for Tonia to remember when. She breathed deep, taking the air into her abdomen, and suggested they'd better take a quieter street. Cecilio said it was regrettable because he'd surely be at the corner of Alvar Núñez and Vespucio Streets at the very least at that time of day. Tonia ignored his comment and asked him where exactly he lived: she needed to get some topographical fix on the suffering that awaited her on that Italianesque walk. Cecilio went on to lament the state his t-shirt was in. A neighbor who does two tours a year with other pensioners had brought him: by now he had at least one from nearly all the tourist spots in the country—and even a couple from Brazil. To him, he said, they're collector's items. Adelma isn't just his source of kitsch t-shirts but also a great friend, his only female friend. By this point, the pace, which was already uncomfortable, had become impossible. It was like a slowmo toing and froing, but with improbable progress, to which had to be added the failed coordination of two bodies perspiring in the February heat. Tonia began to make one of her classic calculations: at this rate, she concluded, she wouldn't even be able to complete a single one of the agreed jobs. All her comments, eloquently aimed at accelerating the procedure of getting him home safe and sound, or something approaching that, he ignored. Messages-in-a-bottle that weren't addressed to him. Tonia assured me she was tempted to take the cotton out of his nose and let him bleed to death right there, lying in the street, indistinguishable from the most authentic tramp. They were sure enough walking down a quiet street, which increased her chances of never being caught. Then she remembered that it wasn't exactly him she wanted to kill that day. If it wasn't for Adelma, Cecilio swore to her, he wouldn't have survived the masses his mother organizes on the anniversary of his father's death. On those occasions, he always drops by to pick her up. She has a hot cup of tea waiting for him and one of those little cigarettes she keeps rolling with the marijuana growing in the plant pots left for her by her son when he went to live in Ibiza. Then they walk together to the Santa Felicitas church. Every September seventeenth, which is the date the Lord chose to take his father who knows where, Cecilio and Adelma walk arm in arm, straight down Montes de Oca, their hearts and eyes alight. He looks on it as a kind of annual procession.

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Without turning away from the window, she asks me a question. I reply that the meeting that was tormenting her had been quite well-attended and that I can't remember who Tonia wanted to kill that day. Besides, it's just a figure of speech of course.

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Tonia asked him if he was running late for the office. No. He wasn't on vacation either. Nor did he work from home. Cecilio didn't work. He doesn't work, I mean. He asked her to turn onto Tacuarí because his house was close by, three blocks away. *Too close.* Tonia assured me the phrase came into her head of its own accord, independently, detached from whatever region of her brain, and with it came a kind of sorrow that took her by surprise. His grandfather bought that house, said Cecilio, and they never moved

since. Except to die, or move on, as his sister says. Or to skip the summer: every year, as soon as December begins, his mother and his aunt leave and don't come back until the end of March. As if they followed some school calendar. On the eve of their departure, his mother organizes a meal also attended by his brother and sister. Cecilio's. Both younger than him. For all of them, that early December dinner acts as a celebration, a way of bringing the year to a close. Like the Mayans and the Phoenicians, their family has its own calendar. Tonia wondered what she was doing there. At least, she said to herself, as they advanced oxymoronic, she had to admit that by that point—about three or four hours had elapsed since the bump—her mood had wandered from the warpath she'd left the house with that morning. At this last supper, they usually eat a small turkey stuffed with chestnuts and prunes by his aunt, and to finish, a panettone made by the Benedictine sisters. A traditional end-of-year meal that invariably disagrees with him. At these get-togethers, he went on, his aunt is the most talkative. His mother, on the other hand, usually makes the basic kind of monosyllabic contributions that keeps the other person talking, like an injection of vitamins. In carefully planned doses, of course. For as long as he can remember, his mother has been a dab hand in the art of getting others to speak for her. Not on account of shyness but detachment, or because she's more interested in the things going through her mind than her environment, he can never quite figure it out. When his father was alive, he was her main spokesperson. Cecilio doesn't remember anything his father said, but he does remember he was always talking. At home, with friends, in the street, on the telephone. Nothing could stop him. He never even gave up talking when he went bankrupt and would up with fewer people to talk to—fewer business partners, fewer friends, fewer acquaintances and lovers. He went right on talking to the end. The nurses who cared for him when the cancer would no longer let him get out of bed remarked to Cecilio that it was a rare thing. There was only one who could keep up with him: from his room or from the garden, Cecilio could hear the murmuring of his father's voice and, every now and again, a burst of laughter from her. The other nurse, by contrast, used to finish her shift looking a little shaken. It's understandable: a lot of people must choose that occupation in order to have some peace and quiet, and if they don't find it, they're at least more than entitled to demand it. Isn't that the image of the nurse we all have imprinted in our minds? He felt that their iconographic force warranted them being elevated to the rank of saints. His aunt is usually the only one that brings him up. His father, that is. She couldn't get through the end of year festivities without mentioning how kind he'd been. Et cetera. On those occasions, his mother always looks at her condescendingly. Cecilio supposes that this is less on account of what she thinks of her husband—his father—than on account of the exaggerated value her sister, that is to say his aunt, has always placed on husbands in general. There was a time when he, Cecilio, also set up home in the country for the entire summer. Three whole months, just as they still do, when they neither go on a trip nor on vacation: they go for the season. He stopped doing it when he started studying at university and then never resumed the habit. He'd rather stay home alone, even though the first day it takes some getting used to. Coming to terms with the silence of the house, starting to follow a different rhythm, no longer dictated by the discipline imposed by his mother. Another thing. That first night, New Year night in the family calendar, he never gets a wink of sleep. Nobody knows or suspects, of course. At dawn, he distinctly hears the efforts made by his mother and his aunt—who on that December night, the only time in the whole year, invariably sleeps at their house—to make sure every movement makes as little noise as possible. They go down the stairs, gauging each step, and close the doors in slowmo. He takes these as small acts dedicated especially to him, as a loving farewell. The farewells, he assured Tonia, leave him with rings under his eyes that take two or three days to go.

(2010)

Translated from the Spanish by Ian Barnett
