

Cynthia EDUL

Extracts from a play and a novel

(I)

Where Do Broken Hearts Go

First Act

“I was beginning to understand that nothing is more uninhabitable than a place where one has been happy.”

Cesare Pavese

“So that was the Lighthouse, was it? No, the other thing was also the Lighthouse.”

Virginia Woolf

Silvana (Mother)

Marina (Eldest daughter)

Santiago (The son)

Agustina (The youngest daughter)

A beach. Early afternoon. A cool wind that little by little kicks up the sand.

Some deck chairs scattered around, some beach blankets, a travel cooler, magazines all about the place, flip-flops, some wicker baskets and tote bags. Few people around.

In the distance, a group of young boys play a soccer game; further away, the lighthouse.

Silvana and Santiago stare out at the sea. Marina reads a book. Agustina, curled up and completely covered by a towel, listens to music in her walkman. A ball bursts into the stillness of the scene and hits her. The others remain unfazed.

Prologue.

Agustina: The first days of summer we would move to the beach. It was literally a move. They filled the car with various objects, edibles, all the necessary things to satiate a family on holidays. For one thing, the destination was not haphazardly chosen. All of my father's brothers spent their summer in the same seaside resort and met in the same spot: the beach that surrounds the lighthouse. We used to get there by boat. We dropped anchor

away from the coast and swam to the shore. One after the other, like ducks in a row. My mother would be waiting for us with the towels at the ready. Meanwhile, the rest of the family had already descended to the beach, deployed the tents and beach umbrellas, like ancient Bedouin tents in the middle of the desert.

I. Early afternoon and the wind kicking up sand

Silvana: What?

Santiago: What about?

Silvana: Were you saying something?

Santiago: No...

Silvana: I thought you said something...

Santiago: No, not, at all...

Silvana: All right...

Santiago sinks his feet in the sand.

Santiago: Where's Agustina?

Silvana (*Pointing in the direction of the lighthouse*): She must be over there...

Santiago: Where?

Silvana: I don't know... I think she went to pick up shells.

Santiago: Shells?

Silvana: Yes, I don't know... She must be somewhere around here...

Santiago: It got cloudy.

Silvana: All of a sudden, yes.

Santiago: And the wind is starting to blow.

Silvana: It's clearing now. It must be a passing cloud.

Santiago: I don't think so. Maybe we should get going in a little while.

Silvana: Hold on, not just yet. Put something on, to keep yourself warm. Put on a jacket.

Santiago: It's not that early. I haven't brought any warm clothes. At what time did you arrange to meet with Uncle?

Silvana: I've brought you a cardigan.

Santiago: What?

Silvana: You go get it. It's in the basket.

Santiago: What is?

Silvana: A sailor cardigan I found in the closet.

Santiago: I'm not wearing that. At what time did you arrange to meet?

Silvana: Early afternoon, he said...

Santiago: That's what he said?

Silvana: Three... Four...

Santiago: Three or four?

Silvana: Oh, for heaven's sake! Don't be so punctilious! We arranged to meet. He told me threeish, fourish, how do you say... threeish, fourish. That's what he said.

Santiago: Okay, okay, I'm sorry... It's like five now, that's why.

Silvana: Do you want to leave? Go.

Santiago: We are very far away.

Silvana: If you want to go, go. Go now.

Santiago: It's okay, Mom. That's not what I was saying.

Silvana: What were you saying?

Santiago: Nothing, it was nothing. (*To Marina.*) What are you reading? (*Marina is still absorbed in her reading and does not answer.*) Well, I can tell you really feel like talking...

Silvana: How can I forget it...? I remember as if it were only yesterday...

Santiago: Which of all the things?

Silvana: Nothing, Santiago. It's all right. You don't feel like talking.

Santiago: But I didn't say anything, Mom. What is it that you remember?

Silvana: Oh, things, things... The times when you jumped off the boat and swam to the shore. That's what I remembered. It scared the living soul out of me...

Santiago: You never liked the sea.

Silvana: No, no.

Santiago: But you never tried to overcome that fear... *(To Marina.)* What are you reading?

Silvana: Leave her alone, she's concentrated. *(Santiago sinks his feet deeper in the sand.)* Don't do that, you're kicking up sand.

Santiago: It's the wind that's kicking up the sand.

Silvana: Whatever. Don't move it.

Santiago: But it may be time to go back now.

Silvana: I waited for you all with the towels. The further away he could set anchor, the more he liked it. *(Pointing towards a distant spot in the sea.)* He made you swim from there. Always acting crazy, your father.

Santiago: The further away from the shore, the closer to the cliff.

Silvana: Because that's where the waves whirl. He would get mad at me because I didn't want to go in the boat. Because I never liked the sea, or the salt. But I could not say that to him. He would get nervous, and would tell me that I was a person who didn't like nature and that it was not normal, and that, therefore, I was unnatural.

Santiago: He'd never use that word.

Silvana: All right, whatever you say. He would get all worked up and say that I was afraid of everything and that that was no way to live. He thought I didn't go into the sea because I didn't know how to swim and that that scared me. And he was also right. I can't swim.

Santiago: You never got into the boat.

Silvana: I did. Twice. I remember both times vividly. Because he made me do it.

Santiago: Have you brought anything to eat?

Silvana: I don't know... Yes. Go see what I have in the cooler.

Santiago: Okay, okay.

Silvana: The orange one.

Santiago: I can see it.

Silvana: I put in two boxes of cookies.

Santiago stands up and goes to the cooler, takes out a box of cookies and starts to eat, putting several cookies in his mouth at a time.

Marina *(Brushing the crumbs off her feet.):* Could you be more careful when you eat? You are throwing crumbs all over the place.

Santiago: Well, well, well.

Marina: Santiago, leave me alone. We're in peace now.

Santiago returns to his chair. On his way back, he discovers Agustina, wrapped up in towels and wearing a walkman. He walks around her.

Santiago: Picking up shells.

Silvana: So there she was. I had not seen her. She covers herself with all those towels. *Santiago kicks her feet. Agustina stands up.*

Agustina: What's going on? What do you want?

Santiago: Turn down the volume.

Agustina: It's not on.

Santiago: Are you cold?

Agustina: The sand bothers me.

Silvana: We didn't see you. Santiago asked about you several times.

Santiago: One.

Agustina: I was right beside you, Mom.

Santiago: Mom said you went to collect shells. What's with all the towels? It's not that cold.

Agustina (*To Silvana*): Where did you put the sweatshirt? (*Nobody answers. Santiago looks out in the direction of the ongoing football match in the distance. Marina tries to concentrate on her reading. Silvana picks up the newspaper. Agustina walks up to the basket and starts to rummage about.*) The sweatshirt, did you see it? The one with a Mickey Mouse on the front.

Santiago: You're still wearing that? Aren't you embarrassed?

Agustina (*To Silvana*): Didn't you see it? Because I saw that you grabbed it and put it in one of the baskets. (*She starts to take out all its contents.*)

Silvana: Don't mess things up, it takes a lot of work to put things back into their place. Right then, a ball hits Agustina in the head and bounces over all their stuff.

Agustina: Aw! Fucking shit! Not again! Those fucking assholes!

Silvana: I told you not to take everything out. Now there's sand on everything. We'll have to wipe down everything. (*To Marina*.) Blow into her eye so that it goes away.

Agustina clutches the eye that filled with sand. Santiago grabs the ball. Silvana gets to her feet to pick up the scattered things.

Agustina: You could've told me.

Santiago: What?

Agustina: That there was a ball coming my way.

Santiago: I didn't see it. (*Tossing the ball.*) Here you go, dude.

Agustina: Now you're best friends with those assholes? Aw! The eye!

Santiago: Come on, they're not doing it on purpose. They're not thinking about you.

Agustina: The eye!

Santiago: You're such a wuss.

Agustina: It hurts, you idiot. The sand.

Silvana: Now everything is a mess. We need to dust it better. (*To Marina*.) Blow into your sister's eye.

Marina: Come near so that I can blow.

Agustina: No. That's gonna bring in more. Oh, God. The sand.

Silvana: Here's your sweatshirt.

Agustina puts it on and sits down. Santiago watches her.

Santiago: Are you cold?

Agustina: The sand bothers me. With the wind. I could never stand the sand. Ever. And least of all, when it hits you.

Silvana: When it's still, sand is nice for someone to watch from a distance, but when the wind drags it, it's terrible, because it hurts. Your father used to tell me that I didn't like nature. But nature can be very rough. What with hurricanes... earthquakes...

Agustina: There's nothing worse than having sand in your eyes. When I was a kid, my skin was so delicate that sand would leave marks on my legs, like pimples, but hollow, all over my legs.

Santiago (*To Silvana*): You don't really like these things either. You're like her.

Marina: It's true.

Agustina: Weren't you reading? It's windy. I shouldn't have come.

Silvana: In a little while the lighthouse will light up. That's what he liked best. When the first light would appear. In the late afternoon.

Santiago: But it's going to be a while. A long while. (*In a pensive mood.*) It's getting cloudier and cloudier and in a while this beach will be completely deserted. I suggest we start putting

things away.

Silvana: I'm not leaving now. Your uncle told me we were meeting in the afternoon. It's not even five now. Plus, the sun is glaring through the clouds. One can sit back and relax.

Marina: Uncle Eduardo was always the first to arrive.

Silvana: Yes, he was.

Santiago: But it's taking him long...

Marina: They would always meet at the same beach and at the same time. All the family. They rented the same tents, every single year.

Santiago: I don't know why he told you here. He's not coming.

Marina: And we...

Silvana: If you keep calling him with your mind just like you're doing...

Santiago: Oh, for God's... Now it's superstition time. What has my mind got to do with all this? Can you explain it to me?

Silvana: I don't know, but...

They remain silent. Silvana stares out at the sea. Marina reads. Agustina listens to the walkman. Santiago grabs a handful of sand and lets it slip away...

Santiago: What time did he say?

Silvana: Early afternoon.

Santiago: That can mean three, four, five. What time is it?

Silvana: Four thirty.

Santiago: I thought it was five. You said five before.

Silvana: When did I say five?

Santiago: A while ago.

Silvana: I said it was early, not five.

Santiago: That's okay. It doesn't matter.

Santiago drags his feet across the sand. Agustina dusts herself off, the walkman is on and at full blast.

Agustina: You're kicking up sand like that, Santiago. It hurts me. It's as if you did it on purpose.

Santiago: You don't need to be so loud. Not everyone is doing everything to you on purpose.

Agustina: What?

Silvana: The thing is, she has very sensitive skin. *(Agustina stands up and heads towards the baskets.)* Don't mess everything up again, it took me a lot of work to get the sand off the things.

Agustina: What?

Silvana: I said, be careful not to get sand all over the things.

Agustina: It's not my fault if those jerks keep throwing the ball this way. *(She goes back to her spot, lies down and cuddles up with the beach blankets.)*

Santiago: Either turn down the volume or lower your voice. *(To Agustina.)* What are you listening to? *(To Silvana, who is trying to read the newspaper.)* How do you do it? How can you manage?

Silvana: Manage what? What?

Santiago: Read that. Like that.

Silvana: Like what, Santiago?

Santiago: That's okay, Mom. Never mind...

Marina: You two don't start, please.

Santiago: For Christ's sake!

Marina: I've been trying to read for more than half an hour...

Santiago: Read, now, read.

Silvana (*Handing one section of the newspaper to Santiago.*): Here, take...

Santiago: What are you giving to me? What's that?

Silvana: The sports section.

Santiago: What do you want me to do with the sports section now?

Silvana: Read something.

Agustina (*Getting to her feet.*): It's as if you did it on purpose, really...

Santiago: I'm not doing anything on purpose, it's windy...

Marina: I don't know, Santiago. But you've been pestering ever since we got here.

Santiago: Her majesty.

Marina: Have you got a problem?

Silvana: Easy now. We've come to spend a day all together as a family.

Marina: You're sticking up for him now?

Silvana: Why would I, if he keeps yanking my chain. But we're not playing his game. You shouldn't play along. The trick is not to play along. He's just bored.

Santiago: You read now. Read that little book of yours. I'm not bored. It's not a beach day.

Silvana: Again with the beach day thing. Beach day, not beach day.

A ball bounces against Agustina's head who had managed to fall asleep. She gets up in a fury.

Agustina: I can't believe this! Not again! Fuck these motherfucking cocksuckers! (*To Santiago.*) Can't you say something to them?

Silvana: That's all right. Watch your mouth.

Agustina: When sand hits me, it hurts, what part of that you don't get, Mom? It hurts me.

Silvana: I'm only telling you to watch your mouth. You can say the same thing with different words.

Santiago: Give me the ball, so that I can toss it back to them.

Silvana: "For crying out loud!", for instance.

Agustina: What are you saying?

Santiago (*Stepping into Agustina's space.*): I told you to give me the ball so that I can give it back to them.

Agustina: Move, retard, stop pretending you're their friend.

Silvana: That language!

Agustina (*To Silvana.*): What did you say?

Santiago: You give it to them.

Agustina: I'm not giving these assholes shit. They have some kind of fixation on me.

Silvana: All right, all right.

Agustina: What is wrong?! Are you afraid someone will listen? There's no one.

Silvana: But it can be heard, it can be heard...

Santiago: Give me the ball.

Silvana (*To Agustina.*): Go to the boys, give them back the ball, and tell them to be careful with you...Talk to them, don't feel ashamed.

Santiago: Gimme.

Agustina: Get out!

Silvana: Do you want me to talk to them?

Agustina: No, Mom, don't you even think about it. (*To Santiago.*) Let go!

Santiago: Okay, you're on your own then. When they come over, you will not have the courage to say a word.

Agustina: How do you know?

Santiago: You never have the courage to say anything.

Agustina: I don't?

Santiago: Here they come. Give me the ball. (*He tries to pry the ball from her hands.*)

Agustina: Let go.

Santiago: You let go, because I'm going to shove you onto the sand and it will hurt. (*Agustina's attention gets diverted and Santiago takes the ball from her hands.*) Ace! (*To Agustina.*) See, you can never keep your word? Your weakness amazes me. Like when they made a circle around you and made you dance. Among the tents. In front of everyone.

Silvana: Don't start with that story, please, whenever you bring it up, things end up badly.

Santiago: We have to make the girl dance! Uncle Eduardo would say. And they sprang to their feet. It was as if they lit up.

Agustina: It was only that one time.

Santiago: It was more than once.

Marina: Auntie Mirta would call out to form a circle. I would die of embarrassment.

Agustina: What happened? You lost your page and suddenly feel like talking?

Santiago: They put you up in a little table and surrounded you.

Marina: Dad made you shake your hands. To the left and to the right, he would tell you. And you did everything just as he told you. You mimicked him perfectly.

Agustina: Why don't you go back to your reading? You are seeing this, aren't you? Aren't you?

Silvana: Well, she got her rhythm from her father's side. They really have rhythm. It's in their blood.

Agustina: Well, that's it.

Marina: Let it be said that Santiago and I tried to protect you. We told Mom to get you down, that when you grew up and remembered it, you were gonna feel like killing yourself.

Agustina: Thank you for your appreciation.

Santiago: You excelled at *lambada*.

Agustina: Santiago, stop.

Santiago: Dad made you learn it in Brazil and you did it for him every time he asked you to. He took you to *lambada* lessons on the beach because he said you had rhythm.

Silvana: Well, she's right. It didn't happen many times.

Santiago: *Chorando se foi...*

Silvana: *Quem um dia só me fez chorar.*

Agustina (*To Silvana.*): Are you going to play along?

Santiago: Don't you remember the moves?

Silvana: She would die of embarrassment, poor thing. I told him to leave you alone, but he would say that I was raising you to feel ashamed, to be afraid and that I could not bring you up like that.

Marina: One day they made a conga line around you. They put her up in a table and made a conga line around her.

Agustina: It all happened in the same day. The *lambada*, the circle, the conga line, it was all the same day.

Marina: One always constructs the story in such a way so as to be the one most favored by it. It's always like that. One chooses to remember in a "certain" way. It's like a way of compensating.

Santiago: Uncle Eduardo took a tambourine out of his bag. They'd brought a tambourine to the beach. He used it to set the beat.

Marina: Come on, baby girl, yelled Aunt Mirta. I told them, don't do that to her. They made you dance *lambada* and then you got an asthma attack after that.

Santiago (*To Silvana.*): You were in the conga line.

Silvana: I never took part of that kind of show.

Santiago: Bullshit.

Silvana: Swear you didn't.

Santiago: I don't have to. You certainly were in that conga line. They had that tambourine

ready.

Marina: They shook her so much that she choked.

Agustina: It was my way of venting my anxiety.

Santiago: Did your therapist tell you that?

Silvana: Stop it, Santiago. Don't be vicious.

Santiago: I'm telling you, they came from the neighboring tents. They were a good audience. Because they got excited. They cheered you the day of the conga line.

Marina: They would dance to anything. When the guys who played *batucada* came by, they would do the same.

Silvana: The *batucada* guys announced the *carnaval*.

Marina: They ran out of their tents and danced after them. They liked the exhibitionism of it all.

Santiago: Then they did the conga line on the shore.

Silvana: Santiago, stop.

Santiago: Don't you remember the move?

Agustina: You're sadistic. (*She cuddles up again among the beach blankets.*)

Silvana: He said a lot of things to me that day, that I filled your heads with fear, that I always kept you warm, that I made you susceptible, that I was a bad influence. He even told me that I choked her.

Santiago: Because he said the world belonged to those who are bold and that he'd got where he did because he didn't give a shit about anything.

Silvana: That is such an ugly word!

Santiago: That's what he said. And he said that shame got you nowhere. (*To Marina.*) That's what he told you, when you wouldn't take off your shirt, not even to get into the water.

Marina: Okay, are you trying to teach me a life lesson?

Santiago: I don't understand why you react like this. You always felt ashamed of the family. It would do you no harm to admit it.

Marina: I was fifteen years old and I felt ashamed of being put in the middle of the tents to dance *lambada* as if they owned the beach. It was only normal that I felt ashamed. Normal. Don't you think?

They remain silent. Agustina turns up the volume.

Santiago: As if they owned everything...

The sound of the waves can be heard in the distance.

Silvana: There are people in the water. It's not a day to be in the water.

Santiago: When I say that, you argue with me.

Silvana: Go get yourself a cookie. Go.

Santiago (*To Agustina.*): What are you listening to?

Silvana gestures at him to indicate that he'd better leave Agustina alone. Agustina does not answer. Santiago throws sand over her feet.

Agustina: Stop it, you moron!

Silvana: He wants to play with you.

Agustina: What?

Silvana: Lower your voice.

Santiago: What are you listening to?

Silvana: He's playing with you...

Agustina: What?

Silvana: Turn down the volume of that thing or you are going to end up deaf.

Santiago: What are you listening to? *Lambada?*

Silvana: Santiago, stop it. Avoid confrontation.

Santiago: Whitney Houston? Are you listening to Whitney Houston? Remember when you asked me to help you translate her songs?

Silvana: Leave her alone, Santiago, don't tease her. We went to see Whitney Houston. I took her to see her.

Agustina: You wanted to go too.

Silvana: Well, yes. It's for my age. She sang like an angel.

Santiago: Where do broken hearts go... I wrote it in a small notebook you had that you closed with a padlock. Every time she closed it, she would lock the padlock. What did you keep in there? Dreams?

Agustina: You're an idiot.

Silvana: She doesn't sing anymore, does she?

Agustina: Mom, are you doing it on purpose?

Santiago: What are you listening to?

Silvana: What did I do?

Agustina: Knock it off, Santiago, I can't stand you anymore.

Santiago: It's getting cold now, the sun will disappear any time now. How long are we going to say?

Silvana: You are so persistent! You can't leave anybody alone. So insistent! Go stand by the water for a while, will you?

Santiago: Okay...

Silvana: You leave me alone now... I'd rather talk with the sea...

The waves can be heard roaring in the distance.

Silvana: Sometimes I see it be so small, sometimes I see it be huge. The lighthouse.

Santiago: Because when there's people around, it looks more distant. Whereas now there's not a single soul left on the beach. It's not at beach day today, is it?

Silvana: At times I feel as if it were today. It's been so long since I last came to the beach.

Santiago: The wind is lifting more and more sand.

Silvana: I'm telling you, it slipped right past me, right past me. The beach remained a fuzzy memory. With so much going on. Yes. Here, it seems as if nothing has changed.

Santiago: There's not much to change...

Silvana: The city center has changed. There are new shops, new clothes shops. The craft stands at the market have changed. But here nothing has changed.

Santiago: They've painted the lighthouse.

Silvana: True.

Santiago: It's loud.

Silvana: So that it stands out.

Santiago: Green doesn't quite go with all this.

Silvana: I don't know...

Agustina suddenly stands up.

Agustina: Mom? You really didn't see me?

Extract from the novel *La Sucesión*¹

I

The summer they left me alone in the city center, something in my family had started to fall apart. As usual, my sister had gone to a pizza place where young men and women used to meet up as they waited for the nightclubs to open, and my brother had gone dancing to the matinee of a beach resort that doubled as nightclub after eight p.m. Clara always managed to surround herself with girlfriends during the holidays, girls from our building or school mates whose parents 'went up' to spend their holidays in a seaside resort they considered "chic," thus boasting their social status. Diego was also always able to find company for the three months we spent in Uruguay, but that time he had asked my father to invite his friend Julián to spend a fortnight with us in the apartment. The boy's family had already returned to Buenos Aires so he, dissatisfied with the prospect of the club's swimming pool that was supposed to accommodate him for the remainder of the summer, was thrilled when my brother gave him the news that his holidays would be extended for what was left of January.

Julián had been our neighbor, but his family had had to sell their house one of the most lavish ones in the Pinar area, because, according to what was said his father had lost more than a million in a promising business venture that had unexpectedly gone bad and had finally made them broke. The details of that ill-fated business were never made clear, but in any case they were forced to sell the summer house and the imported cars, only managing to save their big Torino for the family's transportation; in this symbol of the good old times, they continued to proudly cruise the town. Our situation, was exactly the opposite. It was 1989 and for several years now my father's businesses had started to multiply their yield. He was the youngest son of a modest salesman who, it was said, made a living walking the streets of the Once district, visiting every single shop to sell cleaning supplies and kitchenware. His large family, six brothers and sisters, lived in a small house in San Cristóbal and in time they each started to run their own business. There was never enough food to feed six mouths. So, once he finished the sixth grade, my father had to give up his studies to start working in my grandfather's shop, first sweeping up the place, then carrying boxes until he decided, at twenty, to open his own shop together with my uncle Eduardo, and so fortune slowly began to show its smiling face. With persistence and dedication he managed to accumulate modest capital on which he prided himself, because, as he said, he had started from the bottom and on his own.

And so while Julián's father was forced to sell everything, my father, inspired by the economic boom, had begun to plan moving the family to a place which, in his opinion, would get people to take notice. For the time being, our holiday destination had shifted from Mar del Plata to Uruguay with which he was familiar from earlier visits, when he deemed his economic situation to be stable enough to allow him this luxury. He argued that the Uruguayan beaches had considerably more prestige than the Argentine ones, and took the first step to conquer them together with my uncle Eduardo, when in the mid-seventies they built a small chalet in the Parada 15 area. During the eighties, the whole place would take on a bright shade of gold and my father took a second big step, buying his own apartment in the Pinar area. He took pride in saying that he was the vanguard, that he could see a business opportunity before everyone else--a visionary, that's what he called himself in reflective moments, a visionary, among the first to build a house on those deserted beaches that would become among the most luxurious family holiday destinations¹ in the world. When he first set foot in the place, back in the

¹ The term can both refer to a sequenced succession of events and to the legal process through which the estate of a deceased person is passed onto their lawful heirs

seventies, he was twenty five and there was nothing but sand and rocks, that's how the perennial conqueror story began. Then he would pause, point at the apartment with an ocean view with a gesture that made clear the difference between the before and the after, and smile. In order to move up in life you have to take risks, he would always repeat as a maxim, adding with emphasis that he himself was a man capable of risking everything.

The night they left me alone in the city center, Clara had gone to the pizza place with her girlfriends of the moment; Diego and Julián had gone to the nightclub overlooking the beach while I stood frightened outside the video arcade, still unable to realize that something had started to fall apart. As usual, my mother kept insisting that I needed to have a group of friends with whom I should be spending the summer, that I could not spend all my time with them, that my brother and sister were older now and they could come and go as they pleased, while she pointed at the groups of tanned girls with ponytails secured to the top of their heads with tiny hairpins and who walked together down the main street--free from the vigilant eyes of their parents, she said with emphasis, and I too needed friends with whom I could stroll. See? Just like them, like those girls we just saw there, would you like me to go talk to them and ask them if they'd like a new friend?, she charged, with the intention of walking up to the first group of girls we ran into. In order to squelch her impulse to do something I felt would turn me into the most repulsive being in everyone's, and most importantly my own eyes, I would tell her under my breath that I'd prefer to stick around with them, that I had a stomachache and that she shouldn't worry because I would behave. That night the argument didn't cut it, and after having a cup of coffee with my uncle Eduardo and a businessman friend of the family and his wife, my father decided to go to the casino and suggested my mother take me to the video arcade two blocks away. You stay here, she told me when we got there, and try to make some friends, don't feel ashamed, nobody needs to feel ashamed for trying to meet people. Without paying much attention, she handed me a couple of notes so I could get a good supply of coins and candy, and told me that she would pick me up from that same spot within an hour, hour and a half at the latest, hat I shouldn't go far, and that whatever I did, I should not speak to grown-ups or to kids who weren't my age, because, even though the people in Punta del Este were all well-mannered, and by that she meant they were both well-bred and well-to-do, older ones always take advantage of younger. Then she kissed me in the forehead, and left.

I was left feeling disoriented in the middle of that huge garage, its grey walls decorated by neon lights repeating in different colors and fonts 'Fun on Play.' The racket of the games, which only moments before was just background noise to a familiar scene, was becoming deafening now. The sound from the car races, the pac land victories that tallied their points with a shrill tinkling sound, the epic music from the Olympic Games-- all blended with that mechanic, jumbled orchestra flooding the place. The lights from the machines and the haze caused by the mass of people blurred the sharpness of objects. Standing by the window where the coins were sold, I started to watch two boys playing in the boxing simulator and it was as if that image brought me back to my time and place. The boys' hands were inside two big pairs of gloves attached to the machine by some levers, which acted as extensions of the boxers' arms. They jabbed at the air, alternating their movements; they charged at the imaginary head of their opponent, at the pretend stomach, and if they hit below it, the simulator would ring a siren and the violator would lose points. The boys groaned with the energy they put into each punch, they sweated and cheered at every good blow. I witnessed a knock out. When I turned my gaze to the mechanical landscape of loud lights, I felt more at a loss yet, and a sharp feeling pierced my stomach.

I then walked up to the game I knew best, and the theme of which was the story of a little Indian boy, cruelly separated from his beloved, who comes to her rescue. In order to do so, he has to decapitate a series of monsters, turning more and more dangerous. In the meantime, the little Indian

moves across the woods or the sea, jumping with his board, walking among the clouds and feeding either on the fruits he found on his way, or, if he accumulated enough points, on more elaborate types of food like hamburgers, milk shakes, ice creams, doughnuts with cream and a cherry on top. The little Indian was blonde and wore a loincloth. There was a long line of people waiting to play, and the control of the machine was now in the hands of a little boy who called himself “the champion” and who had been playing for more than an hour now. I asked a girl who looked my age if she was in the line. She looked at me and said yes and that after her were her, her, her, her, her and her and pointed at each of the kids also waiting to play and compete. Are you staying close to here? I asked in an effort to make her acquaintance and thus satisfy my mother’s expectations, but she didn’t answer. I stood to one side of the screen and stared at it from that spot for a while. After a while, almost involuntarily, the girl said, you can play on the other one that’s empty, the thing is, it’s slower and it doesn’t give you the board, but you can try it if you want. I had the feeling she wanted me out of the way; there was no reason for this because I was last in the line and was not going to jump to the front, and besides I didn’t look like a line-jumper either, like others who had the nerve to cut the line. Still, in order to not linger in a spot gradually becoming more uncomfortable, I walked over to the slower game table and inserted my coin. The little Indian moved slowly. One of the buttons was missing, the speed button that allowed you to up the pace, it was pretty dull, but I felt content to be doing something, and reassured myself by thinking that it wouldn’t be long before my mother returned from the Casino, and by the time I reached the first monster the ordeal would be over. In a way the movement of the cartoon had rescued me from the self-consciousness cornering me little by little. The little Indian killed several snails, ate fruits like pineapple or apples hanging from trees; at one point he ate a fruit that doubled the points and when the level changed, some giant rocks started attacking him. Skipping one after the other, he managed to reach the second stage of his journey and so on and so forth until he killed the first monster. In the meantime, the agreed-on hour had already passed and my mother had not returned. Since she had said an hour, an hour and half, I tried not to worry and continued to guide the little Indian until I got to a level I hadn’t ever reached before, in which I had to dodge and kill the spiders dangling from the trees that came down to sting him. You needed to be subtle, and control the movements. Any alteration could kill him. Gradually, I managed to make him dodge the spiders and then he fought the first monster, which spit fire from the mouth. The little Indian hurled little hatchets at its head until he managed to decapitate it; as a prize he received his lover’s shoe, which indicated he was getting closer to her.

An hour and a half had gone by, the arranged time had passed, but my mother had not come to pick me up. I bought more coins and stood in line for the faster game as there were few people left in the arcade; most kids were now outside a place selling *churros*, a local tradition. The game console was now free and I was lucky to get a seat that let me sit at screen level and so my journey began once again. Now the situation was different because I had more speed and the possibility of getting the board with which my speed tripled, and that cheered me up. The options were broader now and I could go for more. So now, beating my own record, I managed to get the little Indian to kill the first three monsters and get his lover’s shoe, necklace and perfume. With what little energy I had left, I reached the ice stage, where the little Indian skated along while some stalactites threatened to fall on his head until finally one of them did. I went up to the register and asked the man about what time it was: it was two a.m. I thought my parents may have been in some kind of trouble and decided to quit the game. On a chair outside the arcade I sat down to wait. Every time a man in a white jacket flashed by, I thought he was my father approaching, but then the face was revealed and I went back to waiting. I bought a bag of popcorn just to have something to do while I waited. The street was deserted and it was cold. The lights of the shops were out; only the arcade and the bar remained open. I asked the time again, now of the man in the popcorn stand, and he said, ten to three. It was late and my parents were nowhere to be seen. I started to cry. Spontaneous tears that came without notice, prompted by the street’s emptiness and the night’s darkness. I walked towards the bar where earlier in the evening I

had gone with my uncle Edgardo but there was no one. I went up to the counter and asked the waiter if he could lend me the phone to call home. When he saw me crying, he handed me the phone. He asked me if I was lost and I answered I was not, that it was not that, that I felt sick, that I had a stomachache. Of course I knew there was nobody home, but it soothed me to hear the sound of the phone ringing. It rang for a long while. I hung up. I looked at the waiter who was staring at me with curiosity or confusion in his face and I said to him, I will wait a little bit, because it is a very big house and they might not hear the phone. I let some minutes go by and dialed again. Nobody answered. But it was as if imagining the sound of the phone echoing in the empty living room linked me somehow to the family universe I was desperately longing for. I looked at the waiter once again and asked for a glass of water. I had stopped crying. He brought me the water and asked me if I was feeling better. I told him that yes, that I felt a little better. I could not tell him that what had calmed me down was his company. He asked me if I needed him to take me some place or if I had some other relative to call, but I answered no, I would wait, just as I had arranged with my parents, outside the arcade. I drank what was left of the water in little sips to delay my departure, to remain under the waiter's gaze for a little longer now that he had become into my haven in the hostile night.

Translated from the Spanish by Camila Falco
