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The Exaltation of the Minimum

On my way to Iowa, I had a connecting flight from Atlanta. I went to the bathroom at the airport, where I saw a very cheerful janitor doing her work. I remember that she was singing. Then I saw her drop something on the floor and joke with someone as I washed my hands. Then a woman came to appreciate her, telling her that her work was not easy and that she was doing it very well. Almost immediately after that, another woman said the same thing to her. I looked around and thought that I must be missing something. Was the bathroom particularly clean and sparkling? Or maybe it smelled really good? Was there some secret code that I did not know?

I was an observer who saw it with certain censorship. It made me think of a conflict that did not belong to me, the American racial conflict. At first, what impressed me was that these women focused their attention on an invisible job. Unaccustomed to the idea that a gesture could simply contain kindness, I quickly concluded that since we were at Atlanta airport, where the racial struggle is very vigorously exhibited, and the janitor was African American, there may be a sense of White guilt since the two women were white. However, it was an attentive look that, no matter where it had come from, and a conscious decision to use language to affirm a simple but accurate reality—a clean bathroom.

With that gesture—made only of words and good intention, a minimal gesture—that contained a different closeness, different use of the human, erased in some way at that moment, of course, with a very thin and small pencil eraser, the tension of various cultural conflicts, both class, and race, that have been in the United States for years.

The role of the writer in culture is to exhibit the social from the intimate, so the reader can understand the identity of the other, from empathy and beauty, look around with enthusiasm and dare to name it. To build an open gaze on what goes unnoticed can be a political act. Name the invisible.

Coming from a country like Venezuela, where even buying a bag of PAN flour can become a political conflict, I've been asking myself if I should be a political writer. And at the same time, I've been a bit against the idea because I'm a rebel and because sometimes politicization leads to propaganda, and propaganda is an easy way to write bad poetry. I greatly admire Cuban writers who have gone through situations similar to those in my country and who had to fight against censorship. Nevertheless, they continue to write books in opposition to the prison of reason, books as majestic as *Before Night Falls* by Reinaldo Arenas, against a regime. Or they simply write to leave the darkness behind and flee—about the sea, about love, or about their mothers, while beneath them, is nothing but fear and pain. The writer must be interested in conflict, but always from a personal point of view, not a massive one, or he loses the literary and becomes a pamphleteer. Conflicting cultures are understood when there is a common point. The role of the writer is to find that point in common with delicacy.

Writing opens a metaphysical door that allows us to understand the intersection of cultures, the intense adventure of having an identity—and consequently all the tensions generated around it. We are a bridge to get to information, using symbols and language, creating synchrony in a hostile world, not from the sinister but the intimate.

In that waiting room, I felt, with a certain ingenuity, a hope that was beginning to write a different story,

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