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# The Follies of Pinzón

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## New future

Carmelo Pinzón sat in front of the director of the Intercontinental Bank and extended his hand, with a check trembling between his fingers.

He was a simple man—more simple than he seemed at that moment. His everyday clothes bore the unmistakable mark of a lifelong worker: faded, worn, anonymous. But today he wore an inscrutable smile. His hands trembled as he passed the check over the counter.

"?WHAT!?" the manager shouted, his stifled howl startling both employees and customers.

He looked at the check, giving himself time to understand what he was seeing—and in doing so, he remembered the events of two days ago.

Carmelo bought a lottery ticket once a week. Over the years, he had exhausted all imaginable combinations of numbers: birthdays, telephone numbers, anniversaries, even random patterns he invented in moments of hope. He never won anything. Each draw

ended the same—with disappointment, with numbers far from the winners.

That week, when he arrived at the store where he always bought his ticket, he hesitated. It was the end of the fortnight; His pockets were thin. But habit won. He went in and bought his five dollar ticket.

This time, he let the machine choose the numbers.

When the bank director finally caught his breath, he stood up and extended his hand.

"Sir," he said reverently, "I believe you are the richest man in the world."

Carmelo smiled and nodded slowly.

Three nights before, watching the evening news, he learned that the national lottery jackpot —one billion dollars— had been awarded to ticket number 71-04-72. He ran to his battered wallet and took out the ticket he had bought the night before the draw.

He shouted. He laughed. He danced around the room shouting, "I'm rich! Rich!" "Ricardo! Millionaire!" as he waved the bill around uncontrollably. His wife, Catarina, came running.

When she understood, she also shouted, jumped, and laughed until she rolled on the floor, choking with joy.

"What are we going to do with so much money, dear Carmelo?" she asked, caressing his face with her warm hand worn out by work.

"Are we leaving?" he replied, giving her a cold look. "No, I AM!"

The relationship between them was fading day after day. In reality, Carmelo could no longer stand his wife of twelve years. She had let herself go; She drank, smoked, and was overweight; She didn't care about her appearance. Carmelo's response was the answer to all that, and he was already thinking about enjoying his money without the burden of marriage. Now he had a lot to think about, because his mind could not comprehend what that amount of money meant.

"Leave," he replied coldly.

Their marriage had been deteriorating for years. Carmelo could no longer tolerate his wife of twelve years. She drank, smoked, had gained weight, and no longer cared about her appearance. In his mind, money was a way out. He would enjoy it without the burden of marriage.

Now, however, his mind struggled to comprehend what such an amount really meant. The next day, the madness began.

He called the factory where he worked and resigned—telling them politely, in essence, to go to hell. Then the phone started ringing non-stop. Friends he hadn't seen in a decade. Relatives he didn't know existed. Business proposals. Investment schemes. Vendors of useless trinkets and black market magic potions "for protection".

Finally, he ripped the cable from the wall and collapsed onto the sofa.

It was his first day as a rich man, and he already hated it. The next day, after returning from the bank, the money became undeniably real. He opened the folder with his account documents, and all doubt disappeared. The bank manager had recommended a financial advisor: all of Carmelo's financial education consisted of surviving from paycheck to paycheck. The doorbell rang.

A smartly dressed man entered, carrying a briefcase of fine leather.

"Héctor Valdivieso", he said, extending his hand.

Valdivieso had been a consultant, ex-consultant, re-consultant and—according to his business card—optimizer of emerging sovereignties.

"Well, Mr. Pichón", Valdivieso began (mispronouncing his name), "tell me—what would you like to do?"

"I don't even know where to start", Carmelo admitted.

Valdivieso presented possibilities: buying companies in difficulties, opening an innovative chain of supermarkets, developing housing projects in expanding cities. Carmelo listened patiently.

"What I want", he said finally, "is a gold mine. Or a couple of airlines."

Valdivieso raised a discreet hand. "Gold has limitations. Airlines are brutally competitive."

"Then I want to buy a country. Be its sovereign. Sit with other presidents."

Valdivieso leaned back, surprised—not by the ambition, but by how natural it came to him.

"I like the idea, Don Carmelo. You are ambitious. Ambition is the true measure of economic potential."

"First", said Carmelo, pleased with himself, "you're hired. As my financial advisor. Salary: XXL." Valdivieso smiled.

"Let's see what's available on the international market. Central America is ideal for beginners. Africa offers more flexibility and fewer journalists."

"And the people?" Carmelo asked politely. "Included. Always included."

"I prefer Central America," said Carmelo. "Africa doesn't appeal to me. Too many black people and dangerous animals." Valdivieso laughed politely.

The next day, Valdivieso returned with a thick folder of maps.

"There are two packages," he explained. "Basic: fragile governments, heavy debt, manageable populations. Premium: useless armies, non-existent opposition."

"Is that legal?" Carmelo asked.

"Legality," Valdivieso smiled, "depends on who is watching."

"Has this been done before?"

"Of course. The novelty is that you will do it with fresh capital." Satisfied, Carmelo nodded.

Before choosing a country, Valdivieso explained, Carmelo had to decide what kind of ruler he wanted to be.

"The one who earns the most money," Carmelo replied without hesitation.

"Excellent," said Valdivieso. "We will announce a casting call. Countries for sale."

"What is Zoom?" Carmelo asked.

It is a system in which all participating countries are connected to a single computer, which allows us to talk to them live and in real time, without anyone having to get up from their desk.

They bought powerful computers and panoramic monitors. A communications technician was also hired.

On the day of the casting, they set up in a hotel room in the center with all their equipment, and Valdivieso appeared on a screen divided into rectangles. Each contained a country. Some had a flag, others what looked like a simple coat of arms.

The casting took place in a hotel in the center. Screens filled the room—each rectangle was a country. San Tiburcio del Sur was the first.

The first to present was San Tiburcio del Sur, a country with a short coast and tropical patience.

"We have pristine beaches," announced its representative. "Can beaches be virgins?"

"What I mean is that they are untouched by tourists, investments and, in general, by the future," clarified the representative, who wore a white robe and a Jamaican hat.

The investor made a polite face.

"Income?"

"Scarce," replied the delegate. "Sometimes it improves, depending on the rains."

"Next," Carmelo ordered disdainfully.

Republic of Kambola.

The spokesman spoke with an echo, as if he were in a building that did not yet exist.

"We have minerals, unexplored jungle and a debt that we do not fully recognize," he said proudly. "Our sovereignty is young, flexible and willing to learn."

"Learn what?" asked the investor.

"Obey whoever promises us a better future," the echo replied, sincerely.

Valdivieso discreetly raised an eyebrow in doubt, which Carmelo interpreted as he wished.

The third country arrived late.

"Sorry," said their representative. "We had a small coup. It's resolved now."

"Minor?" the investor asked.

—Yes, because there weren't any major problems. They only changed the president's name and the photo in the office.

—And what can you tell us that is favorable?

—That we have a currency that is easy to redesign.

—A hymn that needs to be changed, because people don't like it—although the population is content with bread and circuses.

The investor began to feel something akin to enthusiasm.

"Is there a trial option?" the compatriot asked.

"Of course," Valdivieso said. "We can offer you a three-month pilot period of sovereignty. If you don't like it, we'll return the country to you with a certificate of gratitude."

"Certificate?" the representative asked with some annoyance.

"Well, a certificate that represents a considerable financial contribution." The representative leaned towards the monitor, pretending to bow, but in reality, he turned off the monitor and left the room.

In a corner of the screen, a small country appeared that no one had noticed.

"What is that?" the investor asked.

Valdivieso lowered his voice.

"It's a small country that I hadn't considered, but it's cheap, perhaps too cheap to be true. But there are people who still have the capacity to believe in miracles, so we'll rule it out."

Valdivieso marked it with an X on the monitor.

"So, Your Majesty," he said, "which of the two made you feel that your money would breathe easier?"

The investor looked at the screens once more, like someone choosing wine without knowing anything about grapes.

"The one with less history," he said. "I don't want the past to confuse me... Ha ha ha."

Valdivieso smiled.

"Well, then we'll go with San Tiburcio del Sur." And he ended the conference.

And the mobilization began.

Carmelo, between tears and slaps, said goodbye to his wife, leaving her perfectly dressed and with enough money for the rest of her life. She accepted it with joy, resigning herself to the fact that her life would continue in the poverty in which she had lived the last few years with Carmelo. "Better alone than in bad company," she said to herself, hiding a smile.

And Carmelo felt his heart break; But he quickly recovered just thinking about the life of debauchery that awaited him.

He moved to a hotel near the bank to be able to carry out

the necessary transactions easily. The next step was to plan the trip to San Tiburcio, in the south of the country, which was unknown to both airlines and ground transportation companies.

They went to the bank to withdraw the money they would need on their business trip. The manager suffered an economic heart attack when he was told that they were withdrawing their substantial account but he had to accept it because it was his decision

customer. The next step was how to carry the money. They needed two or three large trunks, which would be very cumbersome to transport, so they decided to put the money in bundles. Half a dozen cashiers counted enthusiastically while the rest of the bank's customers despaired as the long queue got longer by the minute.

They arrived at the airport with the five sacks, which they tried to check in as luggage, and a letter from the bank assuring that the money was legal and that the carrier was carrying it under the pretext of going on vacation. Finally, they boarded the plane that would take them to Panama City, the closest commercial port to San Tiburcio. As expected, customs officials began to object to the strange luggage. Valdivieso skillfully resolved the situation by opening his briefcase and passing a wad of bills to the customs agent, which he accepted docilely.

At the same airport, they looked for a smaller airline that operated private flights. Half an hour later, they boarded a twin-engine plane with two passengers and \$500 million stuffed into five thick burlap sacks.

When asked what they were carrying in the sacks, they declared that they were supplies for the cyclone victims in San Tiburcio. The employees looked at each other and said that they were not aware of any cyclone. The investor immediately responded mockingly, saying, "A cyclone always comes in those latitudes."

An hour after a smooth flight, the pilot landed on the dusty runway, which ended right where the main avenue of San Tiburcio began. Many people gathered to enjoy the spectacle of the plane's arrival.

The passengers disembarked under the curious gaze of a hundred Tiburcians; the men in white pants to their knees and bare feet, the women in long skirts and blouses flowered that hung from their nipples in a fragile balance. Half a dozen men offered to carry the luggage to the only hotel with six rooms and a lounge with a foosball table. When they arrived at the door, a crowd of Tiburcio citizens had gathered, wondering

who would those two strangers be who had arrived so suddenly. Their curious glances were directed mainly at the sacks that they soon placed in one of the hotel rooms for their safety. It was Carmelo's first opportunity to introduce himself to what would end up being his own town.

He climbed onto a chair that Valdivieso had brought from somewhere and raised his hand to attract the public's attention.

"Hello, friends, good afternoon. My name is Carmelo Pinzón and I have come here to try to solve your economic problems. That is the main reason for my arrival in San Tiburcio, which I hope will be a long stay."

The crowd was bewildered. What they had heard did not clearly explain the intentions of that man who was wearing a strange black suit and an unknown hat. They began to hear voices making comments and questions, as well as expressions of disgust asking them to leave by where they had come, just as the plane started its engines and lined up for takeoff.

The crowd shortened the distance between them and Carmelo, continuing their protests and expressing their doubts. Valdivieso did not hesitate for a moment to open his briefcase and take out a wad of bills, which he threw with energy at the crowd, creating a real rain of money. As soon as people recognized what those flying papers were, they ran to catch as many as they could, which turned into a pitched battle, causing more people to riot in that human whirlwind.

"This is our first show of goodwill and good will for all of you!" Carmelo took advantage of the situation to represent his ambiguous political intentions.

Valdivieso took out a second wad and repeated the operation. There were shouts, pushes and threats among the people fighting to catch the bills. Carmelo and Valdivieso watched their achievements with satisfaction; They still did not understand the poverty of that city.

When everything calmed down and the dust was blown away by the wind, the action that the visitors considered beneficial left three dead and several injured, which forced Carmelo to request the

healthcare assistance that he was unaware of. The two those responsible regretted their actions, and Carmelo offered aloud to repair the damages with financial aid for those affected and their families.

Thus began the reign of Mr. Pinzón.

## 1 The beginning.

The invitations\*\* The first significant purchase was the hotel. It was the only building remotely suitable to house the general offices of the new sovereignty. The owner accepted the offer without protest. It was generous—much more than the hotel could have produced in ten years of its turbulent existence—and, in any case, there was nothing to negotiate. The furniture was disappointing. It lacked the gravity that the image the sovereign intended to project required. Even so, it would suffice temporarily. New ones had already been ordered

furniture—modern, imposing. Energy, after all, needed a place to sit. The first invitation was addressed to the head of the armed forces: the division general Ronaldo Cienfuegos. He listened, standing, rigid, firm, rejecting the chair that Valdivieso offered him in front of Carmelo's desk. "General," Carmelo began, "I come in peace. My intention is to turn this country into a new power

Central American." The general blinked three times—the same times he had heard that fairy tale before, always sung with different lyrics. His martial gaze rested on Carmelo, waiting for the inevitable lie. "And for that," Carmelo continued, "I need everyone's cooperation." "What is exactly what are you saying?" the general thundered. Carmelo ignored the question and moved on. The general listened, although his hands betrayed him with a slight tremor. "You will be my right hand to control any concerns," Carmelo said calmly. "You will also create, together with your senior officers trust, a kind of Secret Service." "Wow, I can't believe it," the general muttered. "Yes, it may sound... firm,"

added Carmelo, measuring his words. "He understands, General," Valdivieso interjected naturally. "We need to be informed of any subversive movement." "I understand," the general replied. "Do I have your support?" Carmelo asked. The answer came in the loud click of boots coming together. The general saluted. Carmelo stood up and shook his hand. As he left, his eagle-eyed severity softened into a smile. Carmelo and Valdivieso also shook hands, congratulating each other on their first legislative victory.

The next visit was to President Renato Palayarta, the

acting president of Tiburcia. With not much else to occupy his day, he made them wait half an hour before receiving them. Palayarta warmly greeted the two foreigners, assuming they were not dangerous. His smile disappeared the moment Carmelo asked him to resign—immediately—because Carmelo himself would assume the presidency. "This is a coup d'état," Palayarta shouted. "Here and anywhere else. No

you can't eliminate me. I have the legal support of my people and my army." Carmelo laughed—briefly, with disdain. "Mr. President," he said, "don't be so sure. I just spoke with General Cienfuegos. His loyalty is now mine. As for your people—I can buy their will." The president slumped into his chair. "I offer you a dignified exit," Carmelo continued. "You will submit your resignation. I will send you into exile—wherever you choose. You will live comfortably with your family for the rest of your life. I guarantee it." The former president covered his face and left the office, dragging the weight of defeat behind him. From that day on, the skeletal dirt track began to receive daily flights loaded with deliveries—everything was ordered online. The

computers arrived. Mobile phones. Medicines. A tailor arrived with rolls of fine fabric for Carmelo's suits and his staff's uniforms. An imported architect arrived to design both the government offices and the private residence of Carmelo. The house would have sixteen bedrooms, each with a private bathroom, gym, television room and a dining room as well.

large enough to host presidential banquets. The land faced the main road and stretched five hundred meters to the Caribbean Sea. Five hectares in total. Then a platoon of gardeners arrived to tame the wild land and transform it into a flowering estate where sunsets could be admired. All this would take months. Carmelo refused to wait. As soon as his Supreme Commander uniform was ready—his chest

heavy with gleaming medals, all fictitious honors for imaginary achievements designed to impress an ignorant and submissive crowd—he scheduled the transfer of power. Even Carmelo barely recognized himself in the wall-sized mirror. He clutched the flag of the country he had bought and stepped out onto the balcony to present himself as sovereign to a cheering people who did not know him. "LONG LIVE SAN TIBURCIO!" he shouted three times. The crowd repeated it a thousand times. "Long live! Long live! Long live!" The soldiers organized borrowed tables. The women offered traditional appetizers alongside foreign delicacies, all paid for by the new government. Sugarcane liquor mixed with tropical fruit flowed freely. Music filled the air. The ceremony dissolved into barefoot dancing under the open sky. For the moment, the people were happy—animated by the promise of progress. As always, they remained easy to mold in the hands of those who governed them.

## 1 Loudmouth press

The new government began to distribute smiles and lengthy speeches to its people, who waited each day for the promised changes to be fulfilled—among them the creation of new sources of employment and improvements in public health services, which would first require the construction of a hospital and the

incorporation of doctors and nurses. All this would take quite some time; but the people were willing to wait, as they had for centuries, when the Spanish handed over the settlement to its inhabitants. However, the new rulers were never able to grow the population as in the rest of the world, through different levels of economic and moral progress. The example given by those in power was the one inherited from the Spanish conquerors: an iron fist, contempt for the natives — although not for the indigenous women, who were victims of forced rapes that produced the consequences of an imposed miscegenation. Valdivieso was the Secretary of Government and the trusted advisor of Carmelo Pinzón, who evidently lacked the necessary faculties to manage his

capricious desire to govern. One of those days when things don't start as they should, a newspaper from the neighboring country to the north arrived at Carmelo's desk. In it appeared an article that described him as a charlatan: an upstart and fraudulent ruler. The article continued to dismantle line by line the public image of Carmelo Pinzón. Furious, he destroyed the newspaper and threw the remains on his desk, crushing them with a violent slap while shouting for Valdivieso. He demanded to know if Valdivieso had already read the article. "Yes, I have," Valdivieso replied, "but don't pay attention to it. It is a vulgar and unimportant paper." Pinzón, still upset by the truths

exposed in those lines, retorted sharply: "How can you say it doesn't matter? It is a newspaper that reaches the hands of the people and misinforms them. I will not tolerate any disrespect towards this government, which operates with total transparency and

efficiency." His anger increased when he learned that the author of the article was a local citizen who believed himself to be a journalist and published his gossip in that tabloid. Carmelo summoned the head of his personal guard and ordered him to silence the alleged journalist. The officer perfectly understood his president's instructions. Two days later, the body of the alleged journalist was found

drowned in a swamp on the outskirts of town. The prosecutor announced that the man had been decapitated after a drunken fight with several local men. An investigation was said to be underway—ordered personally by the president—to identify the culprits. No arrests were made, no witnesses came forward, and the case quietly sank into the same stagnant waters where the body had been found. The government reaffirmed, once again, its commitment to transparency and order.

## 1 Coronation

The coronation The tailor finished the gala uniform for the president, who immediately ordered Valdivieso to prepare the confirmation of the new government—an event pompous enough to impress the entire population and make clear the strength of its leader. It was scheduled for a Tuesday, because Tuesdays arouse less suspicion

historical. The bells began to ring before there was anything to celebrate. They called just in case. "Louder," Valdivieso ordered. "Let it sound eternal." The ceremony began with the parade of the armed forces: three companies of thirty-six men each, led by Major General Ronaldo Cienfuegos, who puffed out his chest with pride, almost bursting, as he tried to imitate the goose step of the Nazis. The fanfares were imported; The locals sounded too much like the past. The musicians wore new uniforms, with buttons gleaming like gold. They played with disciplined enthusiasm—no one wanted to play a false note in front of the future. The president appeared on the balcony of the hotel (the provisional seat of government), wrapped in a cape excessive and with a fox tail type collar. It wasn't elegant, but

He looked expensive, and that was enough. It made his face and neck sweat profusely, and he endured it more out of obligation than dignity. He walked slowly—not out of solemnity, but to give the newspaper photographers time to find his best angle. The audience applauded with subcontracted enthusiasm. "Long live the Sovereign!" they shouted. They weren't entirely sure what they were cheering for, but the master of ceremonies demanded it, and the people obeyed more out of amusement than conviction. A trembling official read the proclamation in absolute silence. "By the will and unanimous acceptance of the people, and by an irrevocable bank transfer, it is

declared..." He paused. No one had told him what to call something like that. "... His Excellency, Supreme Investor, Protector of Growth, Guardian of Stability, and Supreme King, installed without expiration." The silence became reverent. Then came the applause. Always more applause. They placed the crown on his head. It weighed more than expected. "Is that all?" Carmelo asked during a pause in the program. "Because this burden is unbearable." He whispered now, already anxious to take off the cape and the ridiculous crown. "The real burden comes later," Valdivieso replied. "This is only symbolic." The anthem played. The night before, it had been rewritten to include words like productivity, confidence, and sustainable future—phrases that no one fully understood, but that settled over the crowd like a sedative.

From the balcony, the king waved towards the square. Below, the people raised their small flags, freely distributed. Some still smelled of fresh ink—the aroma of something newly printed and already resigned. For a moment—brief, almost imperceptible—he felt something akin to doubt. He looked at the square: orderly, obedient, efficient. A place already arranged to function without asking

questions. And he perceived, vaguely, that he had stepped on something that would not release its grip. The bells rang again. Louder.

More time. As if rehearsing for the future. The sound erased that thought. "Tomorrow," he said, "I will issue my first decree." Valdivieso bowed. "Something symbolic or something irreversible?" "Neither one nor the other," said the king. "Something that seems harmless, but cannot be undone." Valdivieso nodded, understanding more than he wished. The audience applauded as expected. And so, between imported fanfares, obedient speeches, and bells that did not ring in celebration but in warning, began the reign—designed to last, not by force or conviction, but by custom. It would last as long as the money flowed, the noise remained loud, and no one remembered that there was a time before the bells.

## 1 Gringo visitors.

### The Decree and the Visit

The King signed his First Supreme Decree with a royal heron feather and ink made from blood extracted from a parrot endowed with flowery speech—so that the ink would flow beautifully and the lines would appear cheerful. "The Era of Permanent Prosperity is officially inaugurated," the decree proclaimed. Nothing more.

It was brief, optimistic, and perfectly useless, because it still said nothing. That afternoon, the king developed a taste for midday coffee—black and without sugar, like the illustrious García Márquez. He turned it into a habit, which led him to imagine that it could become a highly profitable export product. He summoned the main farmers of the region and the Agricultural Board of Tiburcia was founded. Credit was offered, along with

agronomic guidance, for the cultivation of coffee, tobacco, and other native crops of the land. The decrees now had

names, and promises too. They were received

warmly by the population. Almost immediately, activity returned to the fields: the men were no longer stretched out in endless naps or playing dominoes until midnight. In less than a year, positive results were already being enjoyed. One afternoon, Adelaide handed the ruler an envelope with the letterhead of one of the world's most powerful countries. The eyes of the Supreme Leader and his secretary followed with enthusiasm the official lines signed by the president of that nation. He requested the honor of a visit to San Tiburcio. The response was sent immediately: YES, of course— along with proposed dates, so that proper preparations could be made for such a distinguished guest. The purpose of the visit was not specified. But that hardly mattered. What mattered was that, for the first time, a pair of power was coming to see him. By official decree, it was ordered to sweep the streets, paint the facades, and gather and confine the stray dogs— especially those that chased bitches in heat. Schoolchildren were assigned to the welcome parade, equipped with flags and brand new uniforms. In front of the presidential building, a wooden platform was erected, it

large enough to accommodate half the city. The bustle of preparations surpassed that which had accompanied the arrival of the King himself, and that bothered him. Even so, he calmed down: that emotion would pass. What worried him most was whether he would be up to the level of a head of state accustomed to moving among the great powers of the world, negotiating matters of global peace —unlike Carmelo, who ruled a universe no larger than San Tiburcio. Adelaide perceived his concern and, with the tact of an experienced secretary, offered discreet advice. "You shouldn't worry, Mr. President. Everyone is a king within their own domain, and you have yours. The language won't be a problem either; they are sure to travel with translators." When the King signed his signature on the final document, something happened that

startled everyone in the palace. The bells began to ring.

—Who ordered that? —asked the King.

—They have always rung —replied an old guard who remained silent at the back of the room—, so old that he seemed to have been born there, having served all previous governments and none in particular—. They ring whenever there are promises in the air.

Carmelo let out a real laugh.

Finally, the long-awaited day arrived.

The visiting leader and his entourage landed in five aircraft known as Liberty — in a monstrous four-engine jet, the official plane of that nation could not land on a runway as small as San Tiburcio's.

The local ruler ordered the royal carriage to be brought out to dazzle his guest, and the people followed in an orderly crowd to the edge of the runway. The head of the visiting state descended from the first plane. At the foot of the stairs was Carmelo, flanked by his cabinet secretaries.

The band filled the air with the music of God Never Dies, chosen without knowing that the powerful visitor was a consummate atheist.

He just shook his head when his interpreter explained the meaning of the song to him, and then resumed his mocking smile as he shook his host's hand.

Carmelo proceeded to introduce each member of his cabinet — a completely unnecessary exercise—.

Above them, the bells continued to ring.

No one could remember who had ordered them to begin.

And no one dared to suggest they stop.

— The banquet of honor.

When Carmelo pointed to the carriage to invite the other powerful man to get in, the visitor made a gesture of surprise. They got in. The Percheron horses became restless when the crowd closed in, blocking their path. The soldiers advanced, clearing the way with rifle butts.

Once the visitors were settled, the meal was announced. The vast hall was dressed with long tablecloths. The waiters paraded with trays carrying the excellences of Tiburcian cuisine.

The visiting president pushed his plate away with a gesture of disdain when he was told that they were pig testicles in mountain sauce.

The main course followed: roast wild boar on mahogany wood. He also rejected it and asked if—since there were animals involved—they could serve him a real hot dog.

The chef apologized. His leader, he explained, had ordered all the stray dogs to be killed.

Dessert arrived: guava sweet with farmer's cheese. He asked for a second serving. Good humor returned to the hall.

The first official meeting.

In the morning, the visitor and his entourage were taken to tour the agricultural field. The president's secretary took note of what her leader whispered in her ear. She also asked questions.

What do they do with the coffee? --And other similar ones—  
always in relation to the country's economy.

At the appointed time, the hall had been transformed from a dining room into a conference room. Syrians and Trojans arrived together and sat around an oval table, that is, it did not have a privileged head. At the farthest ends, the presidents were located, with the national flags behind them.

Carmelo spoke first. He welcomed them with a speech about the solidity of his government and the unstoppable prosperity of his people.

The response—translated and transmitted by loudspeakers—was:

—With all due respect—a phrase that the echo returned as a perfect lie—

—the purpose of this visit is to establish firm relations of friendship and commerce with San Tiburcio.

Therefore, I appoint my Secretary of Foreign Affairs, William Pedroza, as my permanent representative in this country, in charge of administering the export of your agricultural products and the import of ours.

Carmelo frowned.

At the end of the speech, he stood up.

—With all due respect—he said, imitating the visitor—.

Some mocking giggles ran through the locals, who caught the irony.

—We accept your visit as a gesture of friendship.

But we do not admit any foreign interference.

The local cabinet burst into applause.

The blond president demanded silence. He puffed out his chest and spoke:

—Mr. Pinzón, I am not asking for your opinion. This is my non-negotiable offer.

—Sir —replied Carmelo—, I am the one who gives orders in this country.

Here, I am the highest authority.

—I have global powers behind me —replied the visitor.

I represent the most powerful country in the world. His arms moved to underline the meaning: there is no alternative.

—There is an alternative —said Carmelo, in an energetic tone—. But it is for another occasion.

He slammed his presidential folder shut and left the room, followed by his men. The foreign delegation did the same, with their mouths open, still not sure if they had really heard such an affront directed at the visiting president.

The following morning, planes arrived to pick up the delegation. They crossed the streets with their tails between their legs. Somehow, the people already knew the failure and its causes. They responded with boos, obscenities, and furious gestures. The military guard intervened, escorting the foreigners until they were safely aboard their plane.

From the presidential window, Carmelo jumped in place, celebrating his heroic resolution. He did not leave his private viewpoint until the last plane took off.

Adelaide and Valdivieso came to pay homage to the Supreme Leader, who boasted of an act that had restored the admiration of the Tiburcians.

That afternoon, animals began to appear in the palace.

Birds unknown to any zoological manual, hens laying eggs on the ministerial stairs, a donkey that refused to leave the throne room—and that, curiously, no one could remove, until the donkey left of its own accord.—

—Is this normal? —the king asked.

—It used to be —the guard replied—. Then it stopped being. And now it returns for no reason... unless something is about to be announced.

That night, the king dreamed that he was facing a mirror of universal size. Each decree he signed appeared on the other side with slight alterations: where he wrote order, the reflection said custom; where he wrote progress, it said oblivion.

He woke up soaked in sweat.

In the hallway, Valdivieso was talking to himself.

—It wasn't in the contract —he repeated—. This was not in the contract...

—What wasn't? —the king asked.

Valdivieso closed the folder abruptly, uneasy.

—History, Majesty. History always arrives without invitation... and never gives us time to write it.

—Then we will invent something —said the king—. We cannot leave pages blank, or worse, full of errors.

A cold silence entered through the window, shaking the organza curtains. The sovereign went out to the balcony and saw something absent from all his plans—financial, social, or strategic—: the people were not applauding. They were simply there, looking at him.

And in that dense, almost reverent silence, he understood—without wanting to accept it—that he had bought a country...but they had given him a past with its own memory.

Somewhere in the palace, an ancient voice—belonging to no body—seemed to murmur:

—Power is like a disease; one suffers from it.

To shake off the morning irritation, he ordered a breakfast worthy of a ruler of his rank. He was served an omelet made with pheasant eggs, coffee strained through the veil of an Arab princess, and a bread whose shape, texture, and even flavor resembled the breasts of Queen Victoria de los Ángeles, from some remote nation.

The exotic flavors—rich, excessive, saturated with aphrodisiacs—awakened his appetite to do something fun, not only for himself, but for his people. He had already noticed, in the streets and in public ceremonies, many genuinely beautiful young women. He signed a decree creating a beauty contest called

## 1 Miss Tiburciana.

To incentivize participation, each attractive applicant would receive five thousand pesos upon registering. Those who passed the first visual inspection—conducted by a jury headed by Valdivieso—would compete for a prize of one hundred thousand pesos and an exclusive contract that would name the winner Director of Patriotic Holidays and Official Celebrations.

Carmelo rubbed his hands together, delighted with his own ingenuity. He immediately searched the internet for women's beachwear and ordered thirty bikinis along with other items of extreme sexuality to be worn on the day of the contest.

To his satisfaction, the next day he already had twenty

pleasant contestants registered. The competition would take place in the main square, on a pompous carpeted platform dressed with vaporous curtains intended to wave cheerfully in the wind. The public was instructed to bring their own chairs.

On the day of the contest, thirty-six young women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five appeared. The measurements of their attributes were recorded on papers held by the judges.

The program began with a parade of beauties in their tiny outfits, designed to show off their voluptuousness. The same coronation orchestra was rehired to liven up the event. The whole town was electrified by a spectacle never before seen.

Everyone knew each other. Until then, the young women had gone unnoticed by most of the men, wrapped in their simple raw cotton garments and colored ribbons that held their hair — nothing that revealed the curves of their bodies or invited attention—. Now, the single men leaned forward as much as possible to study each movement, memorizing the number worn by the young woman who had suddenly become the object of their new hopes.

Only ten young women advanced to the second round — although this decision was not subject to verification by any of the participants—. The margin narrowed; the selection became tougher. They were evaluated from smile to feet. Some feet were calloused, cracked by the earth that they worked —but that was irrelevant—. The judges evaluated the bodies from the ankles up, pausing carefully on the most attractive features above the waist.

The crowd applauded their favorites furiously. Carmelo, sitting in the center of the jury table, kept his own preferences.

When the third and final round was announced, the excitement overflowed uncontrollably. Five finalists emerged —each more beautiful than the last, all worthy of being queens, although only one could be chosen—. They moved gracefully to the rhythm of a cumbia, twirling and waving their small, work-hardened hands, throwing kisses to the public in an attempt to buy admiration.

—Alicia Ruiz! Representing the province of Patanzas! — announced the master of ceremonies.

She crossed the stage with the steps of a flirtatious tigress. The applause was immediate. The judges took note.

Martina Perez was next. Miss Perez did what was expected of her, but while enjoying her walk on the stage, she twisted her ankle—unaccustomed to wearing high heels—and fell hard off the platform, crashing onto the musicians below. The poor girl got up with the help of the nearest men, who prolonged their help much longer than necessary to touch the beauty of her skin. As soon as the young woman regained her senses, she took off her shoes and disappeared into the crowd, crying over her misfortune.

"We deeply regret what has happened," said the Master of Ceremonies, and called the next finalist. "Eulalia Santos!" Miss Eulalia Santos, from this same town. Eulalia's walk was impressive, and the audience knew how to appreciate it. At the judges' table, Carmelo Pinzón leaned discreetly towards Valdivieso and whispered something in his ear. Valdivieso simply nodded and handed a written note to the other

judges. The remaining finalists did their best to fight for the title. Moments of tense anticipation followed as the judges gathered to designate the winner. The band played triumphant chords when it was time to announce the verdict. "The winner of the title of Miss Tiburcia Primera is..." The voice stopped deliberately, stretching the tension that floated thick in the air. "EULALIA!" The audience's reaction was immediately divided. It was evident that the majority were shouting indignantly—booing, whistling, and insulting, even cursing the judges' mothers. They did not agree with the verdict. They expected the crown to go to Martina Pérez, even though she had not finished her presentation due to the accident—and besides, her beauty was undeniably superior. Her hair floated in the air as she walked, falling over her shoulders like a cascade of ebony,

framing an angelic face with Caribbean features. Her body had an indescribable voluptuousness. And her hands fluttered like the joyful wings of the birds of paradise. The Master of Ceremonies tried to calm the furious crowd, but it was impossible. The judges were forced to withdraw with urgency when stones began to fall on the table, falling dangerously close to their bodies. Carmelo blushed with rage at being contradicted, although no one knew—except the judges—that the decision had been his personal choice, and that the order to choose Miss Eulalia Santos had come directly from him. Backstage, Martina Pérez wept bitterly over her defeat, while on stage Miss Tiburcia was crowned amid public protests. Given the disruption, the event officially came to an end. Carmelo furiously kicked everything in his path, shouting: "Damn ungrateful people!" He punched the air, trying to release his fury. "They will pay for it! I won't let it pass!" Carmelo and Valdivieso exchanged a look of complicity. No one would ever discover that the decision had been made by the Supreme Mandate itself, and that the rest of the judges had accepted it with their ears lowered. Valdivieso summoned Eulalia and asked her to appear the next day at the offices of the Main Mandate.

When she arrived, she was escorted directly to the president's office. Carmelo apologized for the public disobedience, feigning innocence, and as compensation for the offense of the people he offered her the position of private secretary to the president—or Secretary of the Interior—which in practice was the same. Carmelo's true intention was to keep that woman as close to him as possible. They spoke for several minutes while he explained her duties—tasks of which she admitted to knowing nothing. This made it necessary to hire a foreign instructor to teach her the basic principles of the

informatics and secretarial work, which, he assured her, would certainly not be complicated. She was very satisfied and immediately set about fulfilling her responsibilities. She was intelligent and learned quickly—faster than Carmelo expected. When he called her to dictate, she arrived immediately, walking like a princess, sitting next to her boss with her legs crossed and a mischievous and flirtatious air. On the third day he invited her to dinner, and by the end of the week a "friendship" had formed that erased the barriers between the employee and the Mr. President. The dinners turned into giggles, touches of hands, inquisitive glances at the legs and cleavage, on Carmelo's part—and on hers, provocative postures while taking dictation, sensual smiles that signaled her

acceptance of the President's advances. The following week, a cloud of insidious rumors began to circulate—far from the ears and eyes of the Supreme Chief.

Carmelo had few ways to entertain himself with Eulalia beyond dinners and walks along miserable roads in San Tiburcio, and horseback rides through the gardens. Therefore, it was necessary to take the definitive step. It was ordered that all employees and guards leave an hour earlier than usual, so that no indiscreet eye could witness Eulalia's visits to Carmelo's private room. Furthermore, he had no reason to hide his secrets. He was the sovereign ruler and could do with his life what he wanted, and ask favors of any woman he desired. Eulalia was not jealous and was making the most of the benefits of that unofficial relationship. During the day, she continued to faithfully perform her duties as a secretary. She was intelligent and genuinely interested in learning the trade she now had in her hands. Thus, their sentimental relationship was exposed to everyone. One day, Eulalia placed on Carmelo's desk the latest edition of the newspaper from the neighboring Republic of Corán—the same one that had previously published an article

offensive. This time, the editorial column returned with its biting criticisms, which, of course, contained much truth. Carmelo hit the paper with his fist, inflamed with rage. There was no need to analyze the text—deep down he knew that his government had imposed itself by force in many respects and could not escape criticism. The columnist did not mention the measures that did benefit the population: the recent inauguration of the General Hospital, which offered free services from two imported doctors.

Women received care throughout pregnancy and childbirth. Men were given sexual education for contraceptives. The elderly were cared for by a high-level geriatrician. A post office had been established. The elementary school had been renovated, with new walls and classroom furniture. The new teachers brought from Panama injected energy into the children's education, and the students received a daily breakfast that improved enormously their nutrition at home. For these reasons, the people had begun to accept the imposed sovereign. What they did not forgive was his iron discipline, which bordered on martial law—especially the closure of the town's two cantinas and the closure of a small brothel that operated illegally under the command of a foreign pimp. The newspaper seemed to be better informed than Carmelo himself—or his secret service. His indignation grew minute by minute, and he had no intention of remaining silent in the face of insults and slander. He called the head of security, Captain Rogelio Alvarado, and gave him strict orders to avenge the offense. Five days later, the newspaper building—proud of its journalistic mission to report the truth as it saw fit, for the good of democracy in its own country and in neighboring nations— At midnight, the headquarters of La Voz was destroyed by a terrible fire. Investigators could not determine the cause or origin of the

fire, although rumors circulated with certainty, blaming the government of the neighboring dictator Pinzón as the author of the attack. The Tiburtian sovereign received the news directly from Captain Alvarado, who reported in detail how the operation had been carried out. Three men from the criminal underworld had been hired with promises of generous payment to start the fire. Alvarado's soldiers eliminated the guards of the building, and the hired thugs entered carrying several gallons of gasoline, which they spread throughout the newsroom, where paper and materials abounded

inflammables. Once the fire spread, Alvarado's men closed the doors, locking the men inside and making sure that no witnesses were left to testify. Captain Rogelio Alvarado received a gold medal for his mission, successfully completed.

1Search

The Supreme One slept with two imported women: one white, Spanish, of Manchego origin like Don Quixote; the other was a dark-skinned and fiery woman imported from Cuba. To satisfy the payroll, they were officially listed as chambermaids and responded with professional devotion to any whim that occurred to the supreme ruler. They shaved him, bathed him together with them in the same steel bathtub, enameled in impeccable white and supported by lion's paws. They dressed him and combed his hair in different styles, until satisfy him. All that was the playful ritual that lasted more than two hours. They had breakfast together on the terrace overlooking the sea: exotic fruit salads, cereals imported from Norway with Greek yogurt and turtle eggs to replenish the energy spent in carnal games. They left him ready to present himself and fulfill his duties before his ministers and his people—when strictly necessary.

The nocturnal blooms ended two months later. The sovereign grew tired of the same dishes night after night and decided to close that chapter. The fiery mulatto, Facunda, had a surprise prepared for him. "No, sir, I beg you. You can't fire me, I'm pregnant." Carmelo was paralyzed. A child? What he had never achieved with his

wife. Even so, he did not lose his sovereign courage and insisted that she return to Cuba. The woman humbled herself, knelt before Carmelo and told him that if he wanted to keep it a secret, she promised to remain hidden until her fruit was born. That night the sovereign slept alone. The idea of having a son began to

please him; he would have an heir—not only for his fortune, but also for the throne. The next morning he called the women and told Facunda that she could stay, but not in his bed. The Spanish woman, Pilarica, assumed that she would now serve the ruler alone. "No—you will leave." "Magnificent sir, I could also give you a son—blond, and with your handsomeness." Carmelo paused before answering. "What if you can't?" "Then we'll have fun

trying a lot." Carmelo rejected the proposal. Pilarica was reimbursed to the mother country. Time passed as it should until the day of delivery arrived. The doctor who had attended Facunda throughout her pregnancy came with two nurses and settled in a room prepared as a hospital as private as it was improvised. Carmelo paced back and forth in front of the presidential window, with his hands clasped behind his back, and ordered his secretaries not to disturb him for any reason. An hour later the door opened. A

nurse came out carrying the swaddled body of the newborn. Carmelo went to receive her. "It's a beautiful girl," said the nurse, smiling. --"What?"

No. I want a boy," roared the sovereign. He expressed his disappointment by stomping and waving his arms in a wild tantrum. The girl, with features Caribbean, grew up in a small house that the ruler had built for Facunda and to hide his failed attempt to have a

heir. After failing once, he decided to try again with Facunda. A year later, the long-awaited boy arrived.

The sovereign celebrated noisily, for three nights the sky was lit up with fireworks, while the bands paraded through the streets to announce the event. The heir to the sovereign throne had been born. Boxes of French champagne—never before opened, reserved for official banquets—were

hurriedly introduced. Toasts were made again and again with everyone who came to congratulate him on the health of the heir. The people felt proud when it was announced that by official decree the boy would be named Tiburcio Iro. In a gesture more political than fraternal, the heir's mother was presented to the people as First Lady of San Tiburcio and attended the festivities on the emperor's arm. Time passes as when nothing stops it, and the boy grew up behind curtains embroidered in gold and Chinese silk. He turned five years old before anyone realized it, he had become demanding and capricious. Carmelo celebrated his tantrums and, laughing, said that the boy had inherited his father's character and that such virtue had no remedy. His initial education took place in the palace, with professors

highly qualified brought from Europe. Little by little, the boy was educated by the careful work of Miss Helen Schultz, an Austrian and polyglot governess who offered her services online. At the age of twelve, Tiburcio already spoke perfect English without the slightest accent that betrayed his Tiburcian origin. He spoke and behaved like a gentleman from the European courts. His father proclaimed his virtues to the four winds while shaping his future, aware that his own years were advancing towards old age at the speed of a surprised hare. And that was the only thing he couldn't buy: an elixir of eternal life. A cold tremor ran through his body. The end would come sooner or later. "My heir must prepare to govern," Carmelo thought. "I don't want an ignorant man like me to lead this country."

long hours discussing the matter with Valdivieso until they concluded that, once the boy reached the appropriate age, he would be sent to the University of Cambridge in England, specifically to the London School of Economics. Meanwhile, Valdivieso continued his research. Meeting the admission requirements of these institutions, which would not be easy. The same tailor who cut the monarch's suits made a gala uniform in the image of the ruler and placed gold and silver medals on it: one for being born, another for completing his first year, another for finishing his studies with the Austrian governess. He left space on his chest for those who might earn more later. Carmelo watched the uniform in silence. Time, which had never waited for him, continued on its way.

## 1 Splendor

2 To maintain contact with his people, the sovereign took morning walks through the main streets, dressed in his uniform upholstered with medals on his chest. The inhabitants of the town lined up along his path and applauded him, , hoping that the rain of dollars would be repeated. That never happened again. Little by little the crowd was decreasing; the number of converted citizens also decreased. The President Supreme was losing popularity and reduced the frequency of his appearances on the street. Then he decided it was advisable to modify the spectacle that his presence created before the people. He ordered the importation of a carriage—a faithful and irreverent replica of the royal carriage of England, the historic Gold State Coach, created in 1762 and used by all English monarchs up to the current Queen Elizabeth. The Tiburtian monarch never wanted to reveal how much that exorbitant luxury had cost the State—not because he had to be accountable, but because for the first time in his life as a millionaire he gave

account that it was excessive, a ridiculously inflated figure, although he had ordered some restraint in the golden adornment. His hand trembled as he signed the transaction, and a minute later he said to himself, "To hell with it—it's my money; I have a right to enjoy it." He also jumped when he learned that it would

take eight horses to pull such a carriage. It seemed like an exaggeration to him, since he knew nothing about draft horses, and he ordered the purchase of only six Percherons, imported from Hamburg, the stately German city, cradle of the world-famous hamburger. Carmelo Pinzón himself was

dazzled when a huge truck brought the carriage to the backyard of the presidential palace. The carriage shone in the sun, with its fine golden moldings and four historical wrought iron wheels. With a driver's seat worthy of an Irish muleteer. Before taking it outside, they had to wait six weeks for the Percherons to arrive—hungry and exhausted from the long journey, despite having been cared for by a groom

Teutonic who fed them and made them drink fresh water during the ocean crossing that took them to the Colombian coast, from where they traveled in an air-conditioned trailer along miserable roads to San Tiburcio. Days of exhausting hustle and bustle followed, while servants, blacksmiths and furriers dedicated themselves to manufacturing leather bridles, reins and harnesses for the imported horses, which looked like monsters next to the local horses. Special stables were also built, adapted to the size required by the new guests. It was necessary to hire the foreign caretaker to train the local workers in the use of the reins and the cleaning of the Percherons, who had never felt so pampered before. It took two full days to bathe, brush and braid them before hooking them to the carriage. The Supreme Leader visited his horses daily, urging the workers to finish their tasks as soon as possible. The day of the debut arrived. The sovereign put on his gala uniform and summoned his military guard to accompany him on his first trip of presumption. While the

carriage advanced along the main street, the inhabitants of the town ran out to enjoy the spectacle; they had never seen—or even imagined—the existence of horses like the so-called Percherons. Their first reaction was an irreverent laugh at the sight of the animals' furry legs and their carefully braided manes. Their eyes widened at the luxury of the black carriage with gold trim and a Bohemian crystal window through which the leader contemplated the

admiration of his people. He ordered the driver to stop and descended, the coachman opened the door and extended the ladder for the King to descend, with his usual dignity, and told him that he would sit next to him to enjoy the ride. And greet his people. Dazzled by such luxury, the public applauded furiously to their dictator. The leader felt the satisfaction of having recovered the admiration of his people thanks to such an exhibition

extravagant. Naturally, people soon got used to seeing the carriage pass and no longer bothered to return the greeting to their sovereign. On one of the many days when the crowd gathered around the carriage, an egg flew from irreverent hands and crashed against the medal of his chest.

He watched with indignation as the viscous content ran between the gold and silver medals. The crowd burst into laughter. The Supreme Leader searched in vain for the culprit; He jumped out of the seat and, when the door opened to protect him, another egg hit him squarely in the back. He sought refuge inside the carriage to hide his grievance. Through the window he watched the crowd laughing and could not contain his rage, shouting from his private enclosure: "Damn ungrateful people!" He sank into the soft solferino velvet seat. The carriage rides were suspended. Carmelo no longer knew what to do with the horses and began to offer the carriage to other dictators on the continent, with easy payment conditions. Many letters arrived at the palace—some with letterhead, others smelling of disguised poverty, with signatures that seemed to be written on newspaper. The King looked at them without opening them. The businessmen of

businesses from other countries requested an audience, either for commercial interest or simply out of curiosity to meet the madman who believed himself to be the sovereign king of a country

insignificant. Among the few chosen, two men arrived in a private plane, impeccably dressed. They offered the monarch a very lucrative deal: investments that generated a high percentage of profits in clean U.S. dollars. They agreed to await a decision at a future meeting.

Turning the idea over in his head, Carmelo Pinzón realized that since he ascended to the throne, everything had been expenses, investments, and aid. Although the coffers were always overflowing with dollars, not a single miserable peso ever came back in.

He consulted Valdivieso. --"Be careful, sovereign. That doesn't smell good to me."-- "You and your noses," Carmelo replied with a mocking smile. "It's just another investment. Money makes money."

## 1The magic dust

A week later, the business emissaries arrived punctually. The man with the thin mustache got straight to the point. "Do we have your investment, my respectable sovereign?" The sovereign shook his head negatively before answering: --"I haven't been told what type of business my money would be invested in yet." A long speech followed, explaining that it involved a consortium of companies that operated outside of state control in other countries. Carmelo shook his head, doubtful. "Can you explain it to me in plain words?" The men smiled and repeated their definition. "They are public companies and their products are sold internationally, so no taxes are paid. That's why we can offer such high returns." Carmelo still didn't fully understand the proposal and began to suspect. His tone hardened; He asked why, if the sales were so

Hello, they were looking for investors. "We will be clearer," said one of the men. "Your investment will be in your own business. Here you will manufacture the product; we take care of its distribution, and we bring you the profits. Is that clear?"

--What product are you talking about?-- "A product that is in high demand in the United States." "Drugs?" Carmelo asked, surprising the men who hesitated for a few seconds. They took a small envelope and a straw from their briefcase, carefully formed a line with the white powder, and asked Carmelo to inhale it through his nose.

--This is our product. Try it, sir.-- The Sovereign inhaled it as instructed and was violently startled, almost rolling to the ground. The men burst out laughing. It was the sovereign's first time, and the effects were making him

behave grotesquely. He tried, without success, to regain his composure and returned to his seat, shaking his head. --I'm not interested-- he said firmly. "Think about it, my friend. This business is safe. Many rulers have made millions this way and no one says a word to them. They remain as respectable as when they took power—only now loaded with clean money.

--"Built on deceit and deception.--intervened the

Sovereign" "Yes—but you, my friend, are not accountable to anyone. Your independence here is perfect for this business."

## 1Production.

Two weeks later, twenty drums of raw materials arrived by land, along with two Central American technicians who

they would install the laboratory to produce the enigmatic powder and train local workers. A large warehouse had already been prepared, with high walls, a zinc roof, no windows, and an invincible metal fence—built in the most remote corner of the presidential gardens, near the beach. Two members of the secret service kept curious people away, especially when the plant was in operation. A Cessna 172 airplane and four speedboats with powerful engines were acquired to export the product. Although Valdivieso and Eulalia understood what was happening. The sovereign refused to discuss it and ignored them with energetic gestures.

The sovereign heir also confronted his father, the Tiburcian king, without ever obtaining an answer. The studies of young Tiburcio were hastened and he was admitted to the University of Cambridge in London.

## 1 Loneliness

The emperor never knew what day it was, nor the time. It had to be constantly reminded to him, and it was necessary to order that clocks be placed throughout the palace. The office was filled with clocks—clocks given as gifts by friendly countries, by loyal companies; clocks with Roman numerals, Arabic numerals, and others that no one knew how to read. They were simply clocks that wanted to be seen, and others to be heard by their vibrant chimes. They all marked different times. None marked the correct one. One day the king asked his chief of security: "What time is it, captain?" "The time that Your Majesty says it is," he replied, standing at attention and clicking the heels of his boots. "It's the time zone of power," he added, and the ruler was very

pleased. "Then it's time to eat," said the king—and the cooks had to work miracles to send him the food of the day. The king sat down and waited. He didn't know exactly what for, but he waited with discipline, as if someone had promised him something without signing it. In the dining room, the food was served punctually—impeccable, excessive. Fine delicacies prepared by an Italian chef brought from Naples, who cooked pasta in twenty-eight different ways, until the sovereign got tired of Neapolitan, Roman, Calabrian, tourist pasta and

churrigueresque, etc., etc., etc., and sent him back to cook for the ignorant Neapolitans. The king ate alone. Eulalia preferred to eat with her office colleagues. Sometimes the king spoke aloud just to make sure his voice still existed. He ordered the removal of portraits of previous dictators; who looked at him with a familiarity that took away his appetite. He replaced them with portraits of wild animals—"Which, for that matter, is the same," he said, as if he had to explain something that everyone already knew was the sad truth. There were mirrors on all the walls, so he could feel accompanied by the

multiplicity of images. He held imaginary conversations to keep himself company during dessert. "I am the king," he said. "Do you hear me?" The insolent walls did not respond, and the mirrors only returned their own smiles. The sovereign felt isolated from his court, which moved stealthily around him, afraid of disturbing him. That was starting to

worry him, but he didn't know how to remedy it without breaking the barriers imposed by his authority. One afternoon, the postman dared to ask: "Are you still waiting for something, Majesty?" The king hesitated. He thought of decrees, gifts, convenient visits, the state of his bank accounts deposited in tax havens. "Yes," he said finally. "A letter from my son." The postman nodded with ancestral gravity. "That letter takes longer than hope." The comment displeased the Supreme, and the postman was fired the next day for his cheap philosophy, without

compensation. That night, the king dreamed that the whole country was

a closed post office. The doors sealed, the service windows empty, the stamps expired. He knocked on the glass door with his crown, but no one listened. To awakening, he understood what no one had dared to tell him: that he had bought a country, had bought a throne, power. But none of that included peace in his depths. And so, sitting at an impeccable desk, the king began to suffer what was not in any contract. And for the first time in a long time, his mind began to rethink things, and he wondered: "So... What the hell is going on?" He invited Eulalia to dinner. She accepted—but not to forgive him. She intended to make him pay dearly for his infidelity in exchange for two foreign whores who could never give him more than she alone was capable of.

The long-awaited letter arrived at the end of October. Tiburcio would return in fifteen days. The sovereign began to issue orders and make online purchases, preparing for the welcome celebrations.

## 1 Return

The long-awaited letter arrived at the end of October. Tiburcio would return in fifteen days.

The sovereign began to give orders and shop online, preparing the celebrations to receive the prodigal son.

When the small plane landed, Carmelo ran to hug him with tears of happiness in his eyes. The band filled the air with music and the military guard paid honors to the crown prince. The boy had changed; now he looked like a gallant young man, elegantly dressed in a suit in the latest English fashion. A worthy heir.

They arrived at the palace and, from the window, greeted the people, who received the heir with overflowing joy.

Inside, the staff surrounded him. The Supreme presented him to the

most important collaborators and led him to what would be his private office, with carpet, furniture and new decorations that made it look like a bird cage with glass walls. Once they had a moment of privacy, Tiburcio? asked him about his mother.

The sovereign took time to respond. He would have to explain what had happened in his absence, and at that moment he did not consider it appropriate. He promised that she would be present at the banquet that night.

Facunda longed to embrace her son and was filled with joy when an emissary handed her the invitation to attend her son's welcome banquet.

At the time of the toasts, fireworks were launched that illuminated the sky with the splendor of their colors and a rain of stars. People gathered in the main square to enjoy the show as if it were their own; from the presidential palace, the king, his son and Facunda also enjoyed it.

Facunda explained to her son that she preferred to live in the little house that the king had built for her, because she wanted to live away from the bustle of the palace, where she had nothing to do.

That night, Tiburcio thought about organizing a party. He wanted to be in contact with people his age and have fun in his own way. They brought barrels of beer - in England he had acquired a taste for good beer, along with five o'clock tea. Posters were placed on the streets announcing the party and specifying that it was exclusively for people no more than twenty-five years old.

His servants decorated the hall in the Tiburcian style, with flowers and paper banners. The music would be provided by Tiburcio himself, who had brought cassette tapes with the latest music from England.

The guests began to arrive and, due to lack of habit, felt intimidated by the sovereign's son and the size of the hall. More guests kept arriving. Tiburcio tried to encourage them and, to break the ice of the apparent formality, invited the most beautiful girl present to dance: a brunette, like him, with lively eyes and a smiling face, with her black hair gathered in an elegant ponytail.

Tiburcio began to dance, jumping and waving his arms as in an epileptic attack, but the girl was paralyzed. Tibur repeated his

steps, getting closer and closer, until he whispered in her ear:

"Dance with me, miss."

"I don't know how to dance to that music."

Tiburcio stopped jumping and slapped himself on the forehead. It had not occurred to him that he was now on the other side of his old world and that this music had never reached those lands. That's why nobody was dancing, and the party was turning into a failure.

They sent for Candelario, who arrived running with his two companions, two guitars and an accordion, to save the party, which immediately filled with joy, and the beer was consumed in the best way.

Tiburcio again invited the girl he had invited first to dance, and, with clumsy steps, tried to find the rhythm between laughter and trampled fingers, but they had a good time. Three or four melodies later, Tiburcio already knew how to dance those tropical rhythms like the best dancer.

At the end of the party, they were already good friends and agreed to meet again the following Saturday.

During the rest of the night, Tiburcio could not sleep, thinking of the sweet Sofia.

## 1 Farce

The next day, the sovereign unleashed the authoritarian cry:--

"Valdivieso!". -- There was no answer. He shouted again—once, twice, three times—with the same result. Eulalia entered the office to inform him that Valdivieso was not present. The Supreme Leader ordered the guards to look for him. They didn't find him anywhere. It wasn't until the next day when Valdivieso appeared before the monarch, walking slowly, with a pale and affected face. "What the hell is wrong with you, Valdivieso?" demanded the king. --"Look, Carmelo..." he began, without

look him in the eye. "I'm so tired of all this—" "--what the hell is all this? Speak, damn it!" "This FARCE!" said Valdivieso, shaken by a tremor. He finally decided to call the sovereignty imposed by its name, facing the sovereign with the courage that such an offense required. "Don't come to me with nonsense, Valdivieso. I don't need to remind you that you got me into what you now call a FARCE. You have been the director of this theater and my advisor from the beginning. So don't start beating your chest now—nothing exempts you from responsibility."

--"Call it what you want, Carmelo, but I'm not willing to stay here another minute, like a puppet in your hands."

Carmelo Pinzón got up from his chair in a threatening posture. "And what the hell do you expect us to do, then? That's precisely what we came for: to carry out a farce financed with my money. The fact that you now label it with such contempt does not take away from the formality with which we have fulfilled our purposes—yours or mine. They are the ones who brought us here...

--"That's precisely what I've come to tell you: I've gone as far as I could. And I will no longer participate in the farce of a false kingdom. I'm going back to get my life back—if that's still possible—after carrying this poison in my stomach." The sovereign collapsed in his chair. They had just told him four truths that he thought he would never hear. "GET OUT THEN!" he thundered with all the force of his lungs.

Valdivieso turned and walked away slowly, with firm steps, which took him out of the official office and the corridors that had been his battlefield. The next day, with his usual briefcase in his hand and a suitcase of clothes, he went to wait for the

arrival of the plane that would bring the latest purchases. He went up without looking back. He knew it was the best decision he had made in the six years that that dream—painted with colored stripes—had lasted. Inside the briefcase he carried five million US dollars, a sum that had been assigned to himself as compensation for his services as advisor—money that would serve as the basis for a new life, or the continuation of the previous one.

## 1 Danger

The deadly roar of two Black Hawk UH-60 helicopters shook the windows of the presidential palace and raised a huge cloud of dust as they descended towards the main square of San Tiburcio. Without touching ground, they released a cable through which—like spiders rappelling—two platoons of soldiers specializing in covert operations and other missions of classified designation descended. Their objective this time was the capture of King Carmelo Pinzón—arbitrarily ordered by the ruler of that foreign country under the pretext of liberating the Tiburcian people from a dictator linked to drug trafficking. The national guard was easily subdued, overcome by the surprise and strength of the invaders. The soldiers went directly to the palace and stormed it with brutal efficiency.

They arrived at the Supreme Leader's office and were astonished not to find the king. Instead, behind the regal desk, stood a dark-skinned young man, with a frank smile and firm posture. "We want to see the king," said the foreign commander. "I understand your surprise, gentlemen," replied the young ruler. "I regret that you are not aware of the change of power in this country. Now I am the king." The soldiers searched the entire building until they finally abandoned their mission. Carmelo had anticipated them. He remained hidden until the roar of the helicopters faded into the sky.

However, the threat clearly wasn't over with that attack on national sovereignty.

A week later, when the area was free of conspiracies again, the president was informed of the arrival of the drug partners. As a prudent measure, Tiburcio summoned the head of the presidential guard. They spoke for two or three minutes. Then he ordered his secretary to let the visitors in. The men nodded smiling and placed a briefcase on the desk. Still smiling, Tiburcio slid it to the far edge of his desk. "That will no longer be necessary, gentlemen. This matter has come to an end." "No, absolutely not," said the man with the small mustache. "We have a deal, and it can't be broken." Tiburcio straightened up in his chair, frowned, and put force in his voice. "That was my father's business. I have nothing to do with this. Therefore, it no longer exists—neither the king nor the business. Gentlemen, take your briefcase and I hope never to see you here again." The man replied in the same tone, trying to reach for his weapon. "No. This has to continue—one way or another." "Then I prefer it to be the right way," said Tiburcio, smiling and raising his hand with

abruptness. Six armed soldiers came out of the two side doors of the room, pointing their rifles at the visitors, who raised their hands in surrender and began to back away. "Ha! Ha! Ha! Don't forget your briefcase, gentlemen," the president said mockingly. The men picked it up and crossed the threshold without turning their backs on the soldiers. The next day, a Panamanian newspaper published a brief news item: Yesterday, an American-registered Cessna plane crashed near the border with San Tiburcio. The pilot and two passengers died. Investigators suspect the cause was engine failure, according to the air accident expert's report. Carmelo commented on it with his son. "We got rid of them—the hard way," he said. They both burst out laughing, because

they themselves had caused the accident by ordering the gardener to tamper with the traffickers' engine. "Now you must be alert, son," Carmelo added. "These are very powerful mafias, and they won't stand idly by." "We'll see," Tiburcio replied with disdain. Carmelo shook his head. They moved on to other matters, the most important being Carmelo's announcement that he would be leaving the country. "I expected that, Dad. And... where are you going?" "Everywhere," he replied confidently, as if that were a destination. "I'm leaving you the treasure money. It's enough for your government to function. If you ever need more, just ask. I'll keep you informed of where I am." Without saying another word, they hugged tightly. Carmelo walked through the staff offices saying, "There is no king anymore. Today I am a man with a life of my own." And he waved his arms with joy.

## Goodbye Carmelo

The former monarch already dreamed of himself as a man free from worries and falsehoods

He imagined himself—wandering the world, savoring pleasures offered in all languages and colors. That same night, he shaved off his large mustache and cut his hair with garden shears. He packed the few civilian clothes he had. The uniform covered in medals was scattered on the floor, next to the military boots. He stuffed wads of dollar bills into a dirty canvas bag and put on a pair of old shoes, suitable for long walks around the world. He would travel the rest of his life with the wings of his golden plumage.

At midnight, when the silence of the stars crushed over the city, Carmelo got up, dressed in the clothes with

who arrived as a fugitive, was stashed away in the darkest corner of his mahogany wardrobe with six drawers on one side; he walked barefoot so as not to make noise. He left his bedroom with his shoes in his hand, because the right shoe squeaked when walking. He walked to the stables and woke up the stable boy, who did not recognize him. He asked them to saddle his favorite horse, the sorrel. He thought about it initially, but a Percheron would have been too ostentatious. He loaded his belongings on an obedient mule. He asked the stable boy for his serape.

"-I can't give it to you, boss-it's my only blanket."

"-Then buy yourself two new ones," said Carmelo, handing him a twenty dollar bill.

Wrapped in the stable boy's serape and under a peasant's hat, he went out into the street with disguised steps, pulling his horses, lowering his gaze to hide his face. He left behind the palace that had been the center of his illusions and frustrated loves. He crossed the public square and continued along the narrow road that led to the edge of the jungle. Little by little, he merged into the shadows of the dense vegetation, allowing the horse to choose its course. That was his destiny, and nothing stood in the way except fatigue.

As the new day approached, he stopped to rest and drink water from a silent stream. His animals drank too. He wrapped himself in the sad serape and surrendered to sleep.

The dawn revealed a new landscape to him. He was fascinated, watching the birds flutter, celebrating their freedom with

their trills. A flock of parrots burst over the treetops, filling the air with their chattering racket. He loaded the sack on the mule, saddled his horse, and continued with his wandering adventure. Yes.

Nothing more was ever heard of him. But he was surely enjoying his millions in some luxury spa along the French Riviera—most likely accompanied by a couple of untitled princesses.

1The Democracy

And one morning, a surprise arose, which sounded like the prediction of an avalanche.

Eulalia realized that everything had changed with the new Sovereign, who called her to issue his first decree with the fresh freshness of the morning.

"What's wrong, sir?" Eulalia asked, surprised.

"Let tomorrow be marked as the day of independence of southern San Tiburcio."

"Why tomorrow, Mr. President?"

"Because yesterday my father left the country. And now we are completely independent."

Eulalia sighed deeply. She understood that Carmelo was not in danger from his enemies, but from the loneliness that awaited him.

But that didn't matter to Carmelo, because he had always been alone in life.

A year later, a decree was published urging the inhabitants of San Tiburcio to propose candidates for the presidency. Democratic elections were guaranteed.

Tiburcio Iro was unanimously re-elected by a grateful people.

## Part 2

### The Heir

Don Carmelo Pinzón has renounced being King of San Tiburcio del Sur, leaving his son as the sovereign heir. He leaves the country riding a sorrel horse that has no idea of its immediate destiny. Carmelo thinks he knows it, He wants to enjoy what is left of his life, traveling the world and its mysteries, without having a preconceived plan, because the narrowness of his mentality

is rusted by the enormous sum of money he carries on the back of a resigned mule that follows in his footsteps with the fidelity of a Sherpa from Tibet.

The first night of his new adventure passes with the

natural discomforts of sleeping in the middle of the jungle, under the light of the stars, which do not illuminate, they are only there, thirst stretches over the hard ground of unknown lands and wrapped in his zarape that

It doesn't heat up. Far from what it used to be in the palace of his reign. King-size bed with a soft mattress covered with goose-feather-filled blankets and pillows that looked like pieces of passing clouds, and above all, heated with the bewitching breath of a woman to his liking. His horse wasn't entirely happy either, he missed his manger and food on time.

From the third night on, the sorrows became more tolerable and the conviction that this was what he had chosen to change his life for something more entertaining. And he was excited thinking that he was at the gates of another realistic world full of beauty and entertainment. The promise appeared on the horizon

## 1The civilization

A huge valley, bristling with buildings and chimneys that spewed smoke as if civilization were permanently smoking.

—Civilization! —he exclaimed, with a joy that only feels who has never paid taxes.

He stopped in front of a small ranch. A man was working next to the stable.

—Good afternoon, friend.

The man looked at him with that rural distrust that detects problems before they officially arise.

Carmelo offered to sell him the horse and the mule. At a very low price. The peasant examined the animals with an expert eye. He didn't want to buy them. But he liked them.

--I can't buy them, friend.

—Then I'll give them to you as a gift, Carmelo said with rehearsed magnanimity—. I don't need them anymore. I want them to be in good hands... especially the horse. He was my favorite. -- He lied with elegance.

The truth was simpler: he didn't plan to enter the city riding like a redeemed Quixote.

The man's face lit up and his expression changed to one of kindness. Carmelo unloaded the mule and said goodbye. The man, seeing that Carmelo was carrying the sack of his luggage on his back, felt sorry for him and offered him the help of a farmhand to accompany him. Carmelo gladly accepted and immediately thanked him and assured him that the farmhand would receive a good reward.

Two hours later he discovered CIVILIZATION

As night fell, he was already walking through illuminated streets with civilized life. He discovered a hotel and hurried in its direction. The profusely illuminated marquee was the facade of a luxurious

hotel. This did not intimidate Carmelo at all. Upon arriving at the doors, he unloaded the boy and thanked him with a hundred dollar bill. The poor man was happy to see more in his hands than he could earn in a month as a farmhand.

Dragging his luggage and his bag of bills, he entered the hotel and went to the reception desk. The manager looked at him with disdain and told him >> to leave the building. << With the same gesture of superiority, Carmelo raised his voice to ask for the best room the hotel had. The receptionist was surprised and resumed the attack, telling him the amount it cost per night; with the certainty that he could not pay it. Carmelo took out his wallet and said that he would pay in dollars, for seven days in advance.

The man changed his attitude and with a servile caravan, offered him apologies. A bellhop in a showy uniform took him with his muleteer's luggage to the elevator. When they arrived at the door of Suite XA, the bellhop opened the door and Carmelo was stunned to see the excessively luxurious room. Soft carpets muffled his steps, mirrors with golden frames multiplied his image. He looked attentively at a mirror that reflected his whole body, and was about to shed tears; he looked painfully ungainly, dirty and miserable, contrasting exaggeratedly with the luxurious environment. He was very far from the image of King Tiburciano. He regained his breath and gave a bill to the bellhop, who never understood what was happening with that controversial guest. Carmelo was still chewing on his surprise and dedicated himself to touring every detail, appreciating its beauty, luxuries that, even being a king, he had never seen in his life or anything like it. Lost in his ramblings, he felt the demand of his ravaged organism. He picked up the phone to order food, They told him that at that hour, the kitchen was already closed.

--Well, let them open it.-- Carmelo roared with the confidence of his new personality. He had the same money before, but as a sovereign, he did not need to exercise the power of his money; it was enough for him to ask for it..

--I want a chicken dish and a fish dish and a bottle of your best champagne.

## 1New look

The city received him with smoke, the noise of horns and the roar of engines, and an indifference that Carmelo had never experienced.

No one looked at him twice. It was as if he didn't exist

That detail hurt him more than the hard earth of the jungle.

He walked along avenues full of bright shop windows, restaurants with unpronounceable names, and banks that promised security, a word that had always seemed relative to him.

He stopped in front of a clothing store.

He observed his reflection in the glass: dusty boots, sweaty shirt, eight-day beard, and uncertain dignity.

He entered. A shop assistant with a professional smile approached.

—Are you looking for something in particular, sir?

Carmelo was about to answer: "From underwear to the hat".

But he restrained himself and laughed inwardly.

of his needs,

— Yes, everything, miss. Something... discreet.

He ended up buying three suits, four shirts, two pairs of Italian shoes that were not Italian but from Guatemala, and a coat he didn't need, but that reminded him that he could still afford unnecessary luxuries.

He paid in cash.

The shop assistant's smile widened, to the edge of flirtation.

Carmelo left the dressing room looking like a heartthrob from Italian cinema of the last century and filled two trash cans with the clothes

dirty. He went out dragging the millionaire sack in search of a bank; but first he went into a hairdresser's.

The hairdresser was more discreet, seeing the shaggy, cropped hair of his client—How would you like it? He asked with a concealed giggle.

Carmelo hesitated. No one had ever asked him that question without protocol.

—That it doesn't look like... —he paused— ...that I have been king.

The hairdresser smiled without understanding the joke.

After well-intentioned snips, he was left with a cut that made him look like a common private of the fourth class, but it was better than what he had... He looked in the mirror and felt renewed. He was no longer the King, he smiled at the hairdresser who didn't know if he was going to receive a slap or a tip. It was the latter, and he returned the servile smile.

He bought a flashy brand-name briefcase and stuffed it with bills.

With the new refined appearance, but dragging his ragpicker's sack, he entered the International Bank. He looked for the manager's desk and as he approached, he remembered the similar situation when he opened his millionaire account for the first time. The manager first looked at the sack and then at Carmelo's eyes, who took

a seat in front of the manager without waiting to be invited. He explained that he wanted to open an account and manage it with a credit card. To the manager's question, Carmelo put the briefcase in front

to the manager and with complete naturalness he said. -- With what's here. The employee opened the briefcase and let out an exclamation that was heard throughout the room

--I can offer you the best card in the world, Mr. Pinzón

Minutes later, Carmelo left with his golden VINSA card, and with his almost empty sack. -- For minor expenses -- he said to the manager as he said goodbye.

His gaze wandered through space, he saw a plane crossing the sky. -- That is the next step.--he said.

## 1New directions

He looked for a travel agency.

The travel agency was air-conditioned and smelled of good coffee.

A young executive received him efficiently.

—Destination?

Carmelo hesitated, he didn't have a definite plan

He looked at a globe that rested on one of the desks, he approached and began to spin it with the fingers of his hand. A few moments later he pointed at it with his index finger, and made it stop, randomly, pointing to a place on the globe, he pointed to it and said;

--There!

The young woman approached, thinking her client was joking. "It's the Sahara Desert," the agent told him as if she were discovering it.

--Well, that's where I want to go, miss!" he assured her with a broad smile.

The agent smiled with administrative patience. --'What do you mean, sir?'

--I want to go to that desert," he affirmed with a lordly gesture.

—To the desert? -- she still doubted the man's outburst, who did not look like he was joking.

--Yes... What's so strange about that?

She didn't know what to answer, she just took him to her desk to start creating a plan for him.

--The most comfortable way to get you to that desert, sir, is by flying to Casablanca from New York; there I will connect you with an agency that offers tours to the desert. With them, you can be more precise about your intentions. That's all I can do from here.

The first obstacle was a document.

--Is your passport still valid?

Carmelo was about to tell the lady. >>Kings don't need passports,>> but he couldn't because he got a lump in his throat when he remembered that; He was no longer king.

—I don't have one... but we'll figure it out, Carmelo said with apparent confidence.

—I'll need official identification, sir. And a bank form for payments over ten thousand dollars.

Carmelo felt, for the first time since leaving the throne, a slight tingling of feeling in a virtual void; he remembered his new gold card.

--.But I can pay whatever the ticket costs.-- And he put down his gold VINSA card

It was enough for the civilized world.

--In first class? - Carmelo only nodded with a slight inclination of his head.

They arranged dates and times and Carmelo went out into the street as if he were already flying among the clouds over the Atlantic; he walked through the city convinced that his illusions were becoming reality; he had bought a new watch, fine clothes, a hat that didn't fit him well, but gave him the appearance of a mobster, and a ticket to fly to the end of the world.

# 1 Claudia

She had a few days off before starting her trip, and she dedicated herself to enjoying them in the best bars and restaurants; showing off her Italian suits of local origin, for her magnanimity in the tips. She was soon cataloged as an extravagant

diner, for the abundant exotic dishes, which she left half-eaten, and tips that she doubled with the disdain of millionaires. A solitary woman watched him from a distant table. IT WAS THE journalist. Claudia Serrano. Editorial section of the

Panorama newspaper; twenty-something years old. Attentive eyes. And a trained nose to detect stories that sold newspapers. A reporter friend had passed her the information

Claudia saw him in the restaurant. He looked elegant in his new suit and his Rolex peeking out from the cuff of his shirt. Of course, he didn't look like a mobster or a criminal, but he couldn't hide his powerful personality from his role as powerful. And that made him more interesting. Claudia followed his steps for a couple of days, to confirm the information; he was staying in a luxury hotel, paying the bills with a high-ranking executive card; on the third day, she sat down in front of him without asking permission.

—Do you travel a lot or are you running away?

Carmelo looked up calmly and studied his interlocutor.

—Depends on who's asking.

—Claudia Serrano. El Mundo newspaper.--and briefly showed a credential.

--I think they are very indiscreet, out of place, darling questions.

the word "darling" produced a slight displeasure in the journalist.

—what do you want to know?

—Who are you, beneath your handsome appearance?

cinematographic. where did you come from.

--and what does that matter?. carmelo answered evasively, to avoid truths.

--why don't you have a tax record, and why do you pay as if the money were inexhaustible

Carmelo observed her for a long time. He looked at her with the same look as her, studying each other. He liked that.

—what if I told you I was a retired king?

claudia laughed incredulously

--I'm serious, miss

—then I would write the best story of the year.

silence.

--well then, write it down....

For the first time since leaving San Tiburcio, Carmelo felt something close to a true emotion.

he leaned towards her.

—how much do you earn as a journalist?

the question did not offend her.

--that's also a rude question-- and she realized that she was already in the game.

She sized him up, He insisted

—enough not to accept bribes.-- said the journalist

—I'm not talking about bribery. I'm talking about opportunity.

Claudia kept her gaze fixed.

—explain yourself.

Carmelo lowered his voice.

—I need an intelligent, discreet person who understands how the world works, someone who handles paperwork, documents, business... if the case arises.

—Business?" he raised an eyebrow with curiosity

—one never stops being who one was, and you can stop being it.

she understood it in her own way or for convenience... and looked at him inquisitively, trying to guess the end of the game.

—Secretary?" she asked, with slight irony.

—personal advisor.

Claudia was silent for a few seconds that seemed like a diplomatic negotiation.

—with a formal salary, unlimited contract, and full access to information.

She smiled, it was a proposition that was not negligible, but.....

Carmelo insisted

—I like negotiating with ambitious people.

—I'm not ambitious," she replied. "It's simple curiosity.

—Worse still!-- and the two laughed heartily

That night, Claudia could not evade Carmelo's caresses, who was behind on the hunger for vital fluids for life...

The journalist stopped investigating the journalistic objective man, and for a few days only had eyes for Carmelo who rewarded her charms with emeralds and diamonds.

## 1The Farewell

Carmelo had the best intention of celebrating that night, being the day before the departure date. It began with Claudia's silences. Trying to address her problem.

--Carmelo,--she began solemnly.

--NO, listen to what I have to tell you,,, You are an incredible, beautiful and intelligent woman, and...

Claudia interrupted him.--And you don't love me.

--Yes, I love you, but I regret having to tell you that...--he looked at her for a few seconds and took her hands in his.--I must cancel my offer to be my advisor. It was foolish of me to think so. You will understand that this is not possible. I have promised myself a life that goes far beyond business, investments and creating absurd commitments.

--I understand you perfectly. So much so that I came tonight to say goodbye to you, because that life of fantasy and adventure that you offered me has no future for me. Besides, I have a six-year-old daughter who needs me and I can't abandon her.

--Okay, Claudia, I can't give up my plans either, even though I love you and it hurts to leave you.

--Well then, let's toast to the happiness of both of us.

--Cheers!...

They agreed and said goodbye, without resentment or tears. Carmelo watched her walk away with slow but firm steps to continue with her life as a journalist with ambitions.

## 1Morocco

After 8 hours of flight and a long wait for the connection in New York, Carmelo was comfortably nestled in a first-class seat on the flight that would take him to Casablanca in Morocco. The long-legged flight attendant with a face bathed in a professional smile brought him the second martini with two olives, as requested by Carmelo.

--please do me the favor of accompanying me, miss--he said in a display of Carmelian flirtatiousness.

--Sorry, sir, but it's not possible.

--well, I am the king and I order you to.

--yes sir, you are the king, but it is not possible. And she walked away leaving a trail of aroma that could be Arabic or French, at best. Carmelo stretched his neck to follow her steps and had to settle for the sight of her legs, which ran down the hall taking care of her passengers. Carmelo closed his eyes and settled back looking for rest, a minute later he felt the presence of the flight attendant; he opened one eye and managed to see an angelic smile with delicate hands that wrapped him up.

Images and memories began to parade through his mind. He felt happy, freed from the fallacy lived in San Tiburcio, but he did not regret it. It was a fun adventure that taught him that being king is not easy, even being the sovereign of a country that does not

reach to maintain sovereignty if it had not been for the whim of a millio... na...rio... >> and he began to snore like a stray dog... he wandered through the night of an unknown place. He sniffed every garbage dump in search of some waste to eat. A gang of bad guys came out to meet him, growling at him and showing their fangs threateningly.

--what the hell are you doing here?

-- I'm looking for something to eat.- —he told them.

--well, go look for it somewhere else, because this is our territory.

--and I am the king of all the territory.-- he said, raising his snout. all the long-haired ones burst out laughing.

-->excuse me> your majesty. now we are going to see how the kings run.-- and at the chief's command, they all pounced on the poor caramel-colored dog.

Carmelo woke up distressed and with his heart beating fast. it was necessary to call the dulcinea of his reality, to ask her for a vodka tonic, and calm down a little.

between naps and dinner, passed the 6 hours that were necessary to have the African coast of Morocco in sight.

at the travel agency counter he found the information to go on a trip through the Sahara desert. He had to go by bus to Merzouga, which is the border of Morocco with the desert.

## 1 Camelito

the trip was tedious and suffocating for Carmelo, little

accustomed to buses full of Arabs who shouted at each other to understand each other over the deafening noise of the engine. They traveled with chickens, goats and cumbersome bundles. he had to endure all these novelties for more than 4 hours

listening to the racket of the language that penetrated through the ears like the noise of an oxidized machine gun. as soon as he got off the bus he went into a cafeteria as a castaway

looking for water to cool his head and to quench his thirst; then in a clothing store he transformed his wardrobe for the local one, the traditional kandura; a thick white tunic of fine

cotton, which is long, reaches below the knees, and the red and white checkered scarf worn on the head, held with the black ring and falling down the back, or used as a scarf over the face. The final touch to appear like all Arab men was to put on the black sunglasses that greatly reduce the brightness of the sunlight.

He looked at himself in the shop window and felt the satisfaction of fully blending into the Arabic style. He was ready for his foray into the challenge that the majestic Sahara Desert means for everyone. According to reports, he would have to take a tourist trip, or look for a caravan that makes commercial routes to desert towns, and be admitted as a passenger.

He immediately rejected the first option, he did not want to be treated as a simple tourist, and he chose the second option, only he would have to bring his own transport

He went to the market where there is a special section for the sale of animals, goats, chickens, pigs and camels. Carmelo began to look at the camels as if he were an expert and found one that cost 500 euros, but the animal gave him an ugly look and Carmelo didn't like that. How was he going to travel with someone he didn't like? He moved on to the next one, it was a young and strong male camel, with calm eyes and thick lips of good height, the camel herder pulled his head so that Carmelo could inspect him and the animal smiled at him; they settled on the price that Carmelo considered very high, but he did not dare to venture into the traditional haggling, without knowing the camel herder's language. For the same price, the camel herder gave him the camel with its harness and reins and a comfortable saddle, the rod to drive and taught him the basic commands to mount and dismount. He

He said that the camel was called >Nadir>, and you had to say "hoosh" if it was standing so it would sit down and you could ride it. Carmelo didn't like the name Ndir, and he told him that from that moment on he would be called "Camelito". - Which he found very funny, because the name the name was similar to >Carmelo> in diminutive. The camel didn't like it, but he didn't say anything.

He settled his rear on the saddle covered with thick red fabrics and with the wand he lightly tapped >Camelito>'s neck to get him moving and he let himself be led docilely by Carmelo, without looking back to say goodbye to his camel driver.

Carmelo walked with his chest out and with the swaying of his body; he felt like a desert man. All he needed was to start the journey.

A boy, <who did not miss the look of a possible client, approached him walking alongside the camel, to offer his services as a guide, Carmelo listened to him feigning absence. The boy spoke three languages; English, French and Spanish, and tried all three until he found that with Spanish, he got the attention of Carmelo who told him his aspirations.

And Youseph, offered his services to find a caravan that would agree to take him, as not everyone accepts intruders.

Carmelo returned to his hotel, where he occupied a suite worthy of his royalty, and Camelito the camel, enjoyed the comfort of a 5-star manger, with room service.

## 1The caravan

The next day Yousseph had already chosen the caravan that would agree to take Carmelo. It would cost him 5,000 dirhams with no responsibility for his person, on the one-way trip only. The price did not matter to Carmelo, he could pay whatever it was, but he had to go to the exchange house to stock up on local money.

The next day at the agreed early hour, he was ready with his camel to begin the journey that promised an unparalleled adventure. He carried his attire for overnight stays and dry food for a week. The caravan was also ready; it was a long line of 16 camels, all loaded with the products they would sell in the small towns along the itinerary.

The head of the caravan was called Omar Hassan, who spoke to him in his Tuareg language, supposedly giving instructions, which Carmelo listened to attentively until the end when he dared to tell him in English that he did not speak his language. The chief let out a roar of disgust and with a violent gesture walked away with a torrent of Arabic muleteer's words.

When Omar Hassan reached the head of the caravan, he shouted the call for the departure prayer and all the men knelt and blessed themselves, repeating the Islamic prayer, asking for protection and good luck for the long road ahead in the next two weeks of going and as many for the return.

Carmelo looked sideways to imitate the movements even though he could not say the words. It was the most respectful he could be.

to do to join the traditional departure rite. He rode his camel Camelito; he put on his sunglasses and advanced in the last place in the caravan. He was already informed that for the next two days they would advance through Erg Chebbila, a huge expanse of dunes that was lost on the horizon. Carmelo enjoyed every step like a circus dwarf and as the sun rose in its morning routine, he immediately felt the intensity of its burning rays; and he verified the effectiveness of his Kandura, which gave him protection and insulation from. Intense reigning heat.

When the sun was close to setting, and the temperature dropped rapidly, it was a magical hour, when the sun extended the shadows of the caravan; silhouettes that lengthened at sunset, over the sands that were tinged with the reddish glow. The night was announced by the east and the sky; before an intense blue, it lost its depth to give way to the stars. The temperature of the day was also fading and a cold wind was blowing from the north. Now Carmelo's Kandura kept the heat of his body.

Before everything was lost in the darkness, the caravan stopped and arrangements were made to spend the night. The camels were freed from their load, and lay down to rest, exhaling their grunts of pleasure. Chief Hassan called for prayer, to comply with the Islamic rituals of coexistence with the desert. The tents were raised

dormitories and lit a wood bonfire, which tinged with its reddish splendor the white figures of the desert men who sat around it forming a circle. The music of tambourines and two flutes sweetened the atmosphere with their vibrant, enchanting rhythms. Carmelo approached and they made a place for him to sit. He joined the party clapping to the rhythm of the music like everyone else. From the kasbah of Chief Hassan, came a

tall woman with long hair, dressed in gauze that floated around her; with a leap over the men she entered the circle, to begin her belly dance, with sensual movements she went to where her master was, the leader of the caravan, and the two danced, enraging all the men. After two minutes of dancing, in a symbolic movement, she gave a slight push with her hand on Hassan's chest, and he fell

sitting in his place. She continued in her captivating circles until she reached Carmelo, to invite him to dance. Carmelo refused with the movement of his hand but the dancer insisted until she managed to grab him by one hand and force him to get up, encouraged by the shouts and applause of the rest of the men. Carmelo tried to follow the steps as best he could, but it was really impossible for him. Because they were rhythms that he did not know, in addition to the fact that he had never been a dancer. Now the circumstances made it even more difficult; the exciting figure that writhed in front of him, the presence of the chief at a short distance, and the laughter of the men who made fun of his clumsiness, until he chose to flee the harassment and make a convulsive caravan, to thank the lady for her distinction. The circle applauded in his honor, and Carmelo was on the verge of a heart attack. He enjoyed the party for more than an hour and chose to go to sleep. He needed the

rest, his first day in the desert had left him exhausted. He lay down on his blanket and sleep took him along the unknown paths of the imagination.

Suddenly he was Carmelo of Arabia, the king of the desert. He was at the head of a caravan of 75 camels, in a row in which the last ones disappeared behind the dunes that reverberated with the heat of the scorching sun, simulating a mirror of water. The first camels that followed him carried wide, well-padded chairs, with blue silk taffeta awnings

Mediterranean, in which the twenty women of his traveled

harem. He chose daily who was graced to accompany him for the night.

A pack of hungry wolves attacked him exclusively, he fought against the chief wolf and managed to sink his knife into his side at the level of his bloodthirsty heart; he howled and rolled through the sand. Carmelo woke up distressed, and kept listening to the howls that were nothing more than the ritual songs of the first morning prayer, he rubbed his face with energy to make sure he was back to reality, safe and without being king of anything, and kept repeating to himself "In the desert there are no wolves."

The camp was packed up and the caravan began its march. Each day they faced a new challenge. It was not a known routine, because the desert is for its people a way to connect with their spirituality. The feeling of security in the desert for the nomads facilitates spiritual fulfillment. Natural and existential authenticity are intrinsically linked.

But the desert, like the oceans, has its character and when necessary, expresses it with beauty and tranquility or with the violence of its temperamental explosions.

The silence of the caravan's march was broken by the shouts of:

-- --HABOOB!... HABOOB!

Sandstorm

•

It was the terrifying cry that announced the discovery of a

sandstorm forming on the horizon. Black storm clouds convulsing, raising clouds of sand to great heights.

Those closest to Carmelo signaled him to come closer to take shelter inside a tent. Carmelo could already imagine the magnitude of the phenomenon, judging by the panic that was spreading among the members of the caravan.

With calculated speed, the men set up the tents, securing their moorings with strong wedges driven deep.

Half an hour later, the first onslaughts of the Haboob began to be felt. The tents shook as in an infernal dance, and the sand felt like sandpaper on the clothes. The camels were also secured to a stake, although they seemed impassive to the danger, or they had already gone through so many haboobs that one more was not worth a horn to them.

In the kasbah - the house with adobe walls, where Carmelo was invited - there were four women and three men; probably three couples and a Sancho. Although in those people it is not adultery is admitted; but... in the desert you never know anything for sure, and even less under the pimple blanket of a Haboob.

Carmelo prayed, with deep devotion, asking - without knowing to whom - that his dream of the previous night would come true. The giggles and melodious words of the women kept him on alert for a long time, until the wait became useless and he fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, the march that seemed to lead nowhere was restarted. It was necessary to learn from these people, their indestructible perseverance and the ability to remain immutable for hours, subjected to the constant rocking of the firm step of the camels, who also immutably accept their trade inherited by thousands of camelid generations.

Carmelo was in the rear, a place assigned from the beginning of the trip. When he opened his eyes after a suffocating nap, he shook his head and saw that the camel in front of him was further away than usual. With the driving rod he hit Camelito's hindquarters to speed up the pace; he did it for a short stretch and soon returned to his usual rhythm. Carmelo repeated the order with the same result. With louder voices and more energetic blows of the rod, far from shortening the distance, it was lengthening; increasing Carmelo's despair. He shouted in anguish and no one heard him, it was impossible to stop a caravan of 16 imperturbable camels. Carmelo had to settle for following the tracks of the caravan, at the pace that Camelito felt like. Was he sick? Was he

tired? --It is not possible, he answered himself. --Camels don't get tired, do they?

## 1 Lost

Carmelo tried to remain calm. As long as he could follow the footprints engraved in the sand, he would not be completely lost. But that same afternoon, when the sun began to decline, a constant breeze began to blow from the east.

--That's all I needed.--Carmelo said aloud.-- Another Haboob storm is coming. He shook his head and wanted to

ignore it, but he couldn't, especially when its intensity increased every minute.

And so, with the softness of a breath, the valuable footprints were erased. The camel continued with its measured pace, and Carmelo came to the painful conclusion that –  
HE WAS LOST! In the middle of a world of sand and sun.

And also of nights, because as soon as the sun hid behind the gold-bathed horizon, the desert was plunged into absolute darkness. He would have liked to light a fire in the hope that someone would see it, but his illusion crumbled when he realized that he had no firewood, nor matches; he felt the desire to eat, and erased it from his mind, he still had some of his provisions, dried figs and some strips of dried and salted meat that he did not feel like eating, but it was the only thing he had. He lay down wanting to sleep, which worked out very well for him, because he was soon wandering in other places, where he did not have so many problems.

The deep silence of the night plunged him into a restorative lethargy of prefabricated anguish. Time passed quickly and the rays of the rising sun illuminated his eyes. He rubbed them to wake up and what he saw made him stand up in a jump and start running to catch up with Camelito, who had already started the journey on his own.

Carmelo ran after the camel like someone trying to catch their only lifeline in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Shouting curses at him and trying to find the word to order him to stop,

Camelito continued on his way, ignoring the swear words, until Carmelo managed with his last breath to grab the bridle that Camelito insolently dragged.

--You great JERK!, where do you think you're going without my permission? And he continued to berate him until he regained his breath while the camel ignored him coolly. Carmelo made him kneel to ask for forgiveness; Camelito didn't say a word (since camels don't talk) and Carmelo took the opportunity to mount and return to the sad camp and collect his travel gear. Since he didn't know where he was or where to go, he shuddered when he confirmed that he was irretrievably lost. He summoned Allah and the few saints he had references to, to ask for the grace to restore his life. Being honest with himself, he could not avoid clearly understanding his situation. How much longer could he and his camelid endure without drinking a drop of water and without eating? ... Not many, of course. But why count them? He dedicated all the time necessary to meditate on it and accept that this was the decision of his destiny. Philosophically, there was nothing to do to change it and he could only glimpse an end that would come in a future so fragile that it could crack without making the slightest noise. --Death said in a murmur and hearing it produced a shiver that shook his whole body. His gaze scanned the horizon that surrounded him; in any direction it was the same panorama, dune after dune, they all seemed the same, until they merged into a single plain that was lost in the blue deep of the sky. How the hell do the camel drivers find their way? How do they distinguish one dune from among all the same ones? Well, they have done it for centuries and generations. Probably the camels are the ones who know the routes, which made Carmelo leave Camelito's reins free so that he decided the course. He neither hurried him nor spoke to him with sweet words like a good travel companion.

At some point around the time the sun blazed from its zenith, Carmelo saw the image of a lake in front. He shouted with joy at the thought that he would have drinking water for both of them, however Camelito did not react in any way. Upon climbing to the top of a dune, the watery vision disappeared, Carmelo remembered that that brilliant vision that looks like water is just a mirage.

caused by the refraction of sunlight on the surface of the desert. Camelito's pace was getting slower and the two anxiously waited for the sun to sink behind the horizon to give way to the coolness of the night.

## 1The oasis

Three endless nights gave way to as many days of that journey that seemed to have no end.

Camelito subsisted thanks to scarce bushes of dry grass that he found in his path; and to his faculty of nature to live on the water stored in his bloodstream and the energy stored in the fat of his hump. In addition, camels make use of a natural instinct that leads them to find the precious liquid.

That's how, at the hour close to sunset, Carmelo saw a formation of palm trees on the horizon. Was it also a mirage? No, because they didn't shine and because of a small cloud of smoke rising behind. What was not difficult to assume was that it was an oasis, where he would find water. Camelito

he advanced purposefully in that direction and Carmelo confirmed his hopes. The palm trees grew larger with each passing minute, and Carmelo did not avert his gaze, enjoying every step of his ride.

They found a path that led them to the entrance of a wide esplanade surrounded by palm trees and green bushes, with a small lagoon fed by a well. Camelito trotted nimbly until he reached the shore and began to drink for a long time, until he was full. Everything was like a small world that was self-sufficient in the middle of the immensity of the desert, thanks to the water; which by chance of nature existed to form that oasis. Carmelo dismounted and sat on a stone to enjoy the landscape. His mind began to ambitiously plot and led him to think that he could buy that place and turn it into a true paradise. Build a five-star hotel, with large windows to enjoy the fiery sunsets and the full moon nights illuminating the immensity of the dunes with silver. Camels to give rides to the guests and a bar where the sherezadas of the Arabian Nights would give pleasure in bulk. To reinforce his ideals of grandeur, he told himself that if he had already bought a country and named himself King, he could well be the Sheikh, or whatever the Arabic name for the supreme chief of the place is..

A nearby voice shattered his dreams of grandeur into a thousand pieces and brought him back to reality. It was a woman offering him a clay pitcher of water that Carmelo drank with desperation until he spilled it on his chest and emptied the rest over his head.

--AHHH!-- he shouted with the satisfaction of the freshness. Some of the inhabitants looked at him with curiosity. Where had he

had that man with the thick mustache and disheveled beard left? There were no questions or answers. Carmelo looked ecstatically around him; feeling that he was recovering his life, after having lost it a few days ago.

Shouts of. -- A-l-ilah...-- A-l-ilah. They began to multiply and the inhabitants of the oasis surrounded Carmelo, who looked at them astonished by the reception he did not expect. Had they recognized him as King? No, that was not possible, since his reign was already far from those latitudes. He made signs with his hand, trying to deny any supposition. But the answer was the same, respectful caravans repeating the word. -- A-l-ilah. A-l-ilah. It sounded like ALLAH to his ears! The almighty god of the Muslims. A neatly dressed man approached him and spoke to him in Tamashek, the language of the Tuareg, with friendly gestures and a deep look from his black eyes. Carmelo later learned that his name was Mohamed and that he was the chief of the oasis. Carmelo listened to him patiently until he had the opportunity to tell him in English that he did not speak Arabic. The man was not fazed, he simply continued speaking to him in English, to tell him that he >was very welcome> to his community and that they took him as a messenger of the god Allah; because he had emerged from the desert alone and they took that as a miracle, so they felt blessed to have him with them. There was no way to convince that man that he had nothing sacred, and much less of being sent by the gods. His clarifications were not understood or accepted and he continued to be respectfully venerated. He was the guest of honor in the tent that was distinguished from the others by its size and majesty, which was undoubtedly that of the head of that community. They served him abundant delicious food and drank an excellent wine that he had never tasted. The traditional music of tambourines with violins and flutes sweetened the atmosphere and the talk of Carmelo's exploits, which the chief

He translated for the other diners. When he mentioned that he had been the King of San Tiburcio, everyone let out a exclamation of surprise, respect, and veneration rose to a new level. Until the time they served a delicious tea, and they ended the welcome. Then they led him to a nearby kasbah; the interior adorned with carpets and thick cushions of delicate embroidery. They said goodbye and Carmelo fell flat, seeking a well-deserved rest after his eventful solo adventure; now he was staying with the comfort worthy of a sovereign, fed with what for him was a luxury full of exoticism and parading his personality with airs of a Muslim prince who caused displeasure when they saw that he did not practice the Salat prayers that were repeated five times a day; then he invented his own prayer, raising his arms and spinning in circles; the next minute, there were already those who imitated his holy little steps.

Every night the traditional bonfire was lit and they danced around in a circle holding hands. Carmelo always managed to settle between two women who smiled at him and communicated their ardor with the sweat of their little hands. It was easy for him to adapt to the rhythm of the dance, which resembled that of the Greeks. But at the end of the dances, he would go to the solitude of his chamber to sigh for the odalisques.

During the day, he walked taciturn, looking for answers. He did not plan to stay and live the confinement of the oasis, no matter how paradisiacal it may be, unless he managed to get hooked up with the chief's daughter; Sophía, a pretty little woman with a sinuous body and a sweet smile on her face, tanned by the sun, who danced with overflowing joy and the agility of a little deer of only about twenty years old. He had already danced hand in hand with Sophía a couple of times and she had reciprocated with her natural flirtatiousness. But from there to being accepted by the chief was another matter. Such

his investiture as favored by Allah would help him. That remained to be seen. Besides, he was already a very old man for the beautiful little woman. His primary purpose was to get out of there to continue traveling, but... how? He didn't plan to face the desert again riding his Camelito and without knowing where to go. While he found an answer, he dedicated himself to being useful in the community, helping in the field work, his hands as an occasional king were not made for the harshness of the work and he returned daily with blisters on his hands and feet. Esmirna, a woman in her forties with beautiful eyes and generous breasts, arrived after him with a basin of medicinal water and clean bandages to heal his sores and prepare his bed. Carmelo lay down on his bed and motioned for Esmirna to lie down next to him. Esmirna accepted without hesitation. She was the widow of a veteran camel driver who had left her halfway through the pleasures of life, forever. So they were not in danger of adultery. A few days later they dared to walk through the esplanade with impunity and holding hands. The chief Mohamed approved of Esmirna's relationship with his guest, who had already lost all the attributes of holiness.

## 1The robbery

Time passed smoothly, it seemed to be stopped between sighs and unfulfilled desires. Life in the oasis was

quiet, there was no difference from one day to the next; they were born, grew and waited for death with inherited passivity. Carmelo did not bother to keep count. He felt happy to live with them and no longer had any desire to disturb him. Life inside the oasis was not as boring as it seemed at first. They had already relieved him of the hard work of the field and he was assigned

to take care of the sheep and goats. Smyrna took care of feeding him, day and night, with her caresses.

The crack of a gunshot broke the calm. All the men ran towards the palm trees with sticks and machetes in their

hands. Very few with firearms; Carmelo went out to see what was happening and a man who was passing planted a rifle in his chest. Carmelo joined the commotion and ran with them to the fence of the palm trees and fortified himself at the foot of one of them. Outside, a large group of men stationed on the edge of a dune, were shooting at the inhabitants of the oasis and advancing to sneak into the oasis. It was a gang from a tribe dedicated to the assault of caravans and towns. They stole what

they found, kidnapped young women to sell them as slaves, after they had been outraged. They forced their way through the defenders at gunpoint. And the

merciless looting began. The men's efforts to defend their properties were useless. Carmelo for the first time in his life found himself in the fragile need to kill or be killed. But the instinct to survive produced a surge of adrenaline necessary to grab his rifle and carefully aim at the body of one of the assailants, the one who shouted orders riding a spirited white steed that was agitated nervously by the thunder of the weapons. Carmelo missed the first shot, refined his aim and Bang! The chief fell to the ground. The men retreated to begin the withdrawal. They did not do it and redoubled the attack to enter the oasis. Some fell wounded or dead, but most began to loot the kasbahs and cabins; they loaded up with what they considered valuable.

Carmelo was still trembling, shaken by the impression of having killed a man, and did not move from his trench.

One of the thugs came out of the main kasbah with Chief Mohamed, gagged and pointing his arna at the back of his neck.

The men of the oasis raised their weapons above their heads to show surrender.

## 1 Sophia

A second bandit came out of the kasbah pulling Sophia, the chief's daughter, by the hand, who was screaming desperately. The man shook her violently, quickening his pace. They reached the palm trees and the girl had already lost all her energy to try to break free from the claws that held her, The dragged her along. They were heading towards the entrance to the oasis, where Carmelo was entrenched. A scream from Sophia snapped him out of his reverie. He aimed carefully, waiting for the precise moment not to miss the shot. With a steady hand, he pulled the trigger and the man let out a mortal roar. Sophia looked at him in horror and her legs buckled.

..SOPHIA!-- Carmelo exclaimed and went in search of her. He offered her his hand to lift her up and with great caution they walked, taking care not to run into any of the aggressors, until they reached Sophia's kasbah, which was next to that of the chief Mohamed; Carmelo asked her to calm down and made her sit on the edge of her bed. She brought her hands to Carmelo's neck, pulled him in and kissed him on the mouth.

-- Thank you friend, you saved my life!

Carmelo was stunned; what was that? Whatever message was included in the kiss, it was not the time to investigate it. She was very upset by what had happened, and he was not in the mood to romanticize a woman who only

knew briefly. With a feigned smile on his face, he made her lie down and, sweetening his words, said to her:

-- Just stay calm, everything is calm now.-- and he left the house at a slow pace, without looking back.

That night the villagers lamented their irreparable losses with shouts.

Carmelo had lost nothing, because he had nothing. He listened to the laments and felt the need to remedy their anguish, buying them twice as much as was stolen. Lying on his cot, with his hands behind his neck and his gaze lost in the blue ceiling of his tent, he reviewed the events of the day and even wondered if there was any way to help those people who treated him so cordially. But... how? He had neither the money nor stores to buy from. He was dozing peacefully when he felt Esmirna's caress on his face as she lay down beside him.

--Hello.-- she said in a murmur.--Are you asleep yet?

—I was waiting for you.

He sat up when she told him that she had brought him something to eat. The two ate and discussed the events of the day. Esmirna told him that everyone was saying that he had saved Sophía's life. >Well, it was my turn. They passed in front of me and I was lucky enough to hit that bastard—he said with all the necessary modesty. And a second later he continued.--That little woman drives me crazy.

-- "That little woman" is not

for you. Carmelo interpreted the demand as advice; and nodded in agreement.

Smyrna also thanked him effusively for his intervention regarding Sophia, emphasizing that she had her reasons to be more grateful than anyone. Piqued by curiosity, Carmelo insisted on knowing why such gratitude. She paused for a few seconds and made him promise that he would keep her secret without telling anyone what she was going to say. --Of course—said Carmelo—you have my word.

I was still very young. I had just been widowed and, well... you know. Carmelo looked at her expectantly.----No, I don't understand what you mean.

Smyrna hesitated before continuing to reveal her secret. -- Mohammed asked me to be his second wife; and I did not accept, because I did not want to be shared with the same man; but we continued to see each other because in our customs a widowed or divorced woman is attractive to men, because she has the experience of married life and transmits it to the man who marries her. And this for the virility of men is very attractive |

Carmelo took it as a virtual suggestion.--And that is the secret?-- he asked anxiously.

-- Well... I got pregnant from that relationship.

-- That was to be expected. And it's no secret.

-- Sophia is my daughter. --she said in a broken voice.

--WHAT?

-- Here everyone believes that Sophía's father was my husband. Only Mohamed and I know it; that's why I ask you to keep the secret. Sophía doesn't know it either, because since she was little, Mohamed adopted her as his father.

Carmelo was swimming between two waters. One of fluid torrent, with the freshness of a crystalline and undulating stream, and the other, of serene and deep waters of easy navigation; he did not dare to tell Smirna his feelings for Sophía and let the night continue its course, between caresses and moans of a cat in heat.

Two nights later it was a full moon night and the tribe was preparing to celebrate it. A large fire in the center of the square and lots of music to invite the dances. The circle was made and Carmelo immediately joined between two women, at the next turn of the dance, he felt a change of hands and looked with surprise that it was Sophía the new companion. She looked at him giving him the best of her smiles. At a point that the drums marked with a roll known to all, they released their hands forming couples. Sophía was in front of Carmelo when the dance resumed. Carmelo hesitated for moments without knowing what to do.

--Dance with me, Carmelo.

-- I don't know how to dance. He said to look for a way out.

She approached him and began to dance sensually, Her insinuation was more suggestive than words. Her bare shoulders shone in the reddish light of the bonfire; her short dress fluttered with joy and her beautiful legs followed the rhythm

of the drums that maddened the atmosphere. Carmelo could not resist it and with his head buried on his chest, he walked away from the circle in quick steps like a wounded fox.

--What's wrong, Carmelo? She said, grabbing his arm when she caught up with him.--Don't you like to dance with me?.

--I like it, but I'm too old to dance with you.-- were the only words he found to get out of the predicament. He knew for sure that Esmirna would be watching him from some dark place. and also, looking at that beauty and youth so demanding, he repeated to himself that he was not the right man for that bright little woman.

He left a kiss on her hand and continued on his way until he melted into the darkness of the night, without the slightest regret.

A few days later the cry of

**1! Rakba!**

-- rakba!, set all the people of the oasis in motion. A caravan was approaching from the South.

The oasis was a necessary stop for the caravans that were looking for rest and water, and mainly trade. They always brought something to sell or exchange with the locals. Cushions and tunics richly embroidered by the skillful hands of the women, who in turn bought the fabrics and threads that were brought to them from some city. The men gladly helped to unload the camels, feed them and put them to rest, such was the spirit of the Tureg, who by Muslim tradition, should profess with their brothers of the desert.

Carmelo learned that his goal was to reach Bou Saäda,

He asked Sheikh Mohamed and he informed him that Bou Saäda is a medium-sized city that is inside Algeria, from where he could reach the great city of Tunis, which is located in front of the southern end of the Italian peninsula. That sounded fascinating to Carmelo who saw the opportunity to leave the oasis and continue his journey around the world. And he let Mohamed know, who asked him not to leave them, without knowing the sentimental reasons that led him to seek that way out. Finally he had to accept it and helped him to speak with the head of the caravan, so that he would admit him as a passenger. The same scene of haggling with the head of the caravan that took him to this oasis was repeated. On this occasion Carmelo no longer had cash and offered to pay him as soon as he arrived in a city that had a bank. They agreed on the price and Carmelo prepared to resume his epic journey.

The day came when the caravan was ready to resume its route and all the villagers gathered to say goodbye. Carmelo approached with his well-dressed, well-fed Camelito, and with the water tank full. It would be a journey of about eight days in good weather.

Esmirna accompanied him to integrate into the assigned place; the her daughter, Sophía, accompanied her. Carmelo tried not to shudder when he saw her, and limited himself to greeting her with a nod of his head and a smile. It was obvious that Esmirna had taken her to establish sentimental distances.

He handed him a leather bag with food and said goodbye with a long kiss and held him, keeping their foreheads in contact. -- I'm going to miss you.--he said in a murmur and kissed him again on the mouth, without caring that everyone saw her. Sophía looked away; pretending she didn't care either. Carmelo

He extended his hand to say goodbye to Sophia and pulled her in for a hug, wanting to carry in his chest the sweet contact of that woman who had pierced his heart, unintentionally. The chief's voice at the head of the caravan ordered the march, and they began to move at a slow pace.

Carmelo climbed onto Camelito's back and put on his sunglasses. Camelito didn't protest and started walking, he knew perfectly well what that meant because walking through the desert for long days was in his genes.

Carmelo still had the energy to look back, the oasis was beginning to dissolve. He shook his head when his imagination recreated a fleeting image of the oasis with a 6-story hotel peeking over the tops of the palm trees. --It would have been something great. --he said to himself, with a smile on his face.--Or maybe another madness.

The days began to pass with the monotony accustomed and the rituals already known by Carmelo, in this caravan there were no odalisques dancing at night in the light of the flames of the bonfire, which made the nights longer and colder.

The caravan stopped for a couple of days in a small oasis called Al-fajir, which in worldly terms could be called a technical stop, as the purpose was the replenishment of water and food.

Carmelo had already learned to live at that rhythm, lulled during the day by the rhythmic walking of the camels or his own, too, when he got tired of sitting and walked for a couple of hours.

A week later, the profile of Bou-Saada was on the horizon. The caravan went into a corral to unload the camels and start their business. Carmelo and the chief went

in search of the bank, to withdraw money and pay what was agreed. He no longer had the slightest intention of returning to the desert, so he gave his camel Camelito, his faithful companion of many miles of travel, to the caravan. The next step was to reach Tunis in North Africa, the capital and continue to the city homonymous that looks at the Mediterranean Sea. Which meant a great attraction.

## 1Tunis

He took four days of well-deserved rest, in a luxurious bed and eating with an excessive appetite, the best dishes of Arab cuisine. Before going to bed, he immersed himself in the tub with perfumed waters and thick layers of foam, until he fell into a comforting lethargy, and then underwent a body massage session in the seductive hands of a Swedish specialist. All this made him feel in Tunisian paradise. The beaches of La Marza and La Goleta are of fine sand, bathed by the waters of the Mediterranean, they were an extension of his paradise and he enjoyed them, like an orphaned child in Disneyland. Before his four days came to an end, he felt that it was impossible for him to abandon that paradisiacal life. But when he was informed that he was a short distance from Italy, he changed his plans and stayed a couple more days to have the sanity to take the next step.

He wandered through the main avenues of the city, enjoying the lights of shops and buildings, levels of civilization that he had not seen in a long time.

The sound of cheerful music reached his ears from the doors of a bar. He felt the desire to savor a good drink and entered. It was a warmly lit room. The large crowd chatted noisily and smoked like Hungarian sailors. The group of musicians poured out a traditional Arab melody and announced the night's show. The conversations quieted expectantly. The lights dimmed in intensity and a spotlight pointed towards the back of the room. The music accelerated its intensity with the tam-tam of its tambourines and violins. A dancer appeared wrapped in subtle veils. Her bare feet took her to the center of the stage. Her arms fluttered like those of a bird of paradise, her hands spun in circles and gestures that provoked the applause of the spectators. In the rapid turns the veil extended like the wake of a ship in flight and left her chest uncovered for moments. Two beautiful spheres crowned by the black nipple. All eyes of the audience followed each turn of the dance full of lust. The dancer spun near Carmelo's table and gave him a charming smile. She came closer and covered his face with one end of her veil. As she spun, the veil slid over Carmelo's face. She repeated the same luck with two other randomly chosen men. And leaving her bust uncovered, in maddening spins she disappeared through the back door. The demanding applause of the spectators was silenced by the entrance of six odalisques as beautiful as the first; who completed the show.

Undoubtedly Carmelo would have liked to call the first dancer to his table, but he felt incapable of intimidating a woman of such high veils, since none of the women in his life came close to such beauty and seductive capacity. He paid his bill and took those mammalian dreams to his hotel bed.

The next day, he sought out his powerful ally, the travel agency. He was ready to take the next step.

He was informed that he was a few hours from Italy, precisely at the southern end of the peninsula. A ferry would take him to Palermo, the capital city of Sicily.

## 1 Castaway

The next morning, Carmelo was already with his briefcase in hand, eager to board the ship. A few minutes later, they opened the entrance to the boarding ladder, the passengers rushed to find a seat next to the windows and enjoy the landscape, which was nothing more than the infinite sea. Carmelo sat in front of the bar and waited patiently for it to open. The ferry sounded three hoarse blasts and started moving. He was greeted by a sea

choppy that made the boat rock and pitch violently.

Over the loudspeakers, the captain's voice was heard warning that passengers should remain in their seats for their own safety. What Carmelo didn't like was that he was sitting next to a fat lady who smoked cigarette after cigarette. Carmelo already had his fourth whiskey in his hand and was returning to his half-lit seat when the boat pitched violently, causing him to lose his balance and fall face down into the fat lady's arms, spilling the whiskey right into the deep abyss that separated her hemispherical breasts.

--Damn it! Exclaimed the fat lady in a bellow.

Carmelo took out his handkerchief and tried to dry her boobs monumental. The lady, with a slap, rejected the attention

of Carmelo and all the surrounding passengers laughed at

laughter. Carmelo stood up and stumbled with a sore knee and his empty glass in his hand, walked to the back of the cabin. He crossed the door that led to the sunny stern deck, and walked towards the starboard railing. He enjoyed the view of a horizon that in the distance looked like a beautiful sea

calm. His body could not resist the swaying and everything started to spin in his head. He clung to the railing desperately. He felt a dizziness that stirred all his insides. He bent over as much as he could to vomit without splashing,

precisely at the moment when the boat was listing to his side. He lost his grip and fell into the sea. He shouted desperately for help as the boat moved away without anyone hearing him. He was lost in that immensity that minutes before had fascinated him with its tranquility and relaxing deep blue. He stopped shouting when he saw that it was impossible for anyone to hear him from the boat. His good swimming skills kept him afloat and he tried to stay calm. There was nothing to do, he had no coastline in sight that he could reach by swimming. And he felt fear. Was this the end of a life full of frustrated ambitions? With unlimited wealth, with a camel with which he had finally achieved an Arab empathy. And the memory of the oasis *teña lina* with the name of *odalisque*.

He regretted not having achieved the purchase of the oasis. He could have become, if not a king, at least a famous sheikh of the tribe. His absurd thoughts were suddenly interrupted when he saw a shark that was

approaching. He felt terror and remembered at the same time, having read, that in front of sharks you have to keep a cool head and not provoke the attack with movements of anguish. The shark approached him calmly and Carmelo realized that it was not a

shark, it was a beautiful dolphin that looked at him smiling with its bottle nose and moved away silently.

--¡UFFF!.- what a scare.--he exclaimed trying to catch his breath.

All he had to do was float and conserve his energies. What good would it do him to conserve them? He was not going to withstand his situation for long, hours, perhaps

Time passed slowly... He took off his jacket to have more freedom of movement. The sun began to decline over the horizon, igniting the fire in the immense clouds that traveled without destination. Exhaustion was already present And Carmelo was spinning around observing the horizon. Hope is the last thing a castaway can cling to.

The murmur of an engine reached his ears.

-- HELP!... HELP!... HERE! And he waved the sack with desperation Trying to be seen. He kept shouting until the fishermen's boat approached and extended their saving hands.

Carmelo was profuse in thanks until they answered in Italian telling him that they did not speak English. He then tried in Spanish, which has words similar to Italian.

-- I fell off the ferry. -- he repeated until the fishermen nodded.

--Sei caduto dal ferry?

-- Yes... Yes. From the ferry

They continued to misunderstand each other with signs because the fisherman steered the boat west. Fortunately, Carmelo realized it was the opposite direction and started the commotion again with signs and similar words

--NO...NO... Not Tunisia..

-- Don't you want to go to Tunisia?

-- No, No Tunisia... I'm going to ITALY!

-- What are you saying? Then go to Sicily

-- Yes... Chichilia...chichilia... Yes!-- he said

Images of that country he had just named as "Chi-chi-lia" immediately jumped into his mind. The country where all the women honored the country that had seen them born. Carrying the national symbol par excellence in front. Their boobs. He imagined that they would be of all sizes and textures. There were small and insensitive ones,

of medium size, with variants, such as the ambitious, demure, the haughty,

the promising ones that would soon be big and cheerful

. Among the large ones were those that vibrated with every step of their owners,

the radial ones with a shortwave radio, and the FM ones - easy to handle.

the melodramatic ones, like hysterical melons,

the get-togethers, of hopeless spinsters.

The ambiguous ones, that are given to more than two. And others of unforgivable classification.

He had fallen asleep in those Chi-Chimecan dreams, when a lurch of the boat brought him back to reality. He took off his shirt to wring out the water that had soaked him.

An hour later the horizon showed the profile of a city. -- Palermo. -- said the fisherman pointing to the city. As soon as they touched the dock, Carmelo jumped as best he could onto the Italian planks. He turned to give thanks, and say goodbye. But the men with a gesture of surprise, signaled that they expected a tip.

-- Denaro signore. -- Which was very fair to ask, a reward for the service of saving his life and transporting him to land.

Carmelo's smile faded, while his hands patted his chest and the pockets of his pants, finally

He let out a cry choked with anguish. He was looking for his wallet that he carried in his jacket, and he didn't have the jacket.

-- My jacket!...I LOST my jacket!-- And with gestures he repeated his anguish to the fishermen.

-- Your jacket? Wait, wait,

The man hurried out to his boat to pick up the jacket that was lying in a corner of the deck like a wet rag. When Carmelo saw him coming with his jacket in his hands, he shouted jubilantly.

--Thank you...Thank you! And he found the precious wallet in the inside pocket.

The sailors were then waiting for the reward, But Carmelo only found some Algerian banknotes, which were no longer of any use to him, and he gave them to the fishermen; who, upon seeing them, rejected them, saying:

-- No...no...no. Italian lire, please.

They located a bank, and Carmelo went there with his card

VINSA.

At the ATM he asked for 500 dollars, and to have them exchanged for local currency. The cashier had to call the manager to authorize the transaction; they were not prepared in that town for larger amounts. They put a pile of bills on the counter that totaled 180,000 lire. A quantity of bills that made Carmelo feel, once again, like a true

millionaire. They had to lend him a bag to withdraw his money.

The fishermen were waiting for him at the door, they greeted him with broad smiles. Carmelo opened his bag and tore off a handful of

bills without counting them, and handed them over with a gesture of natural benevolence in a King on vacation.

He looked for a hotel that lived up to his remaining dignity. He handed over his card and didn't care about the exorbitant charges per night of the room. He told himself that whatever the equivalent was, >he deserved it<. He entered his room and was once again fascinated by the luxury that surrounded him. --I'm already liking this life.-- he said to himself as he looked in the Venetian mirror or whatever it was with its lavish golden frame. He looked at his scrawny clothes, which reminded him of the passage of his fall into the sea and the time he spent in his castaway condition. He laughed out loud, until he rolled on the floor. Crawling on all fours, he went to the refrigerator and took out two small bottles of whiskey. He sat on the edge of the imperial bed and drank them in two gulps each. He felt the pleasant hit of the alcohol and lay on his back to enjoy it until he fell into a deep sleep.

## 1 The mafioso

The next day, he bought a new white linen suit and a wide-brimmed hat that planted the image of a common mafioso. He ate lunch and dinner in the best restaurant in the city. He wandered through the streets enjoying the shop windows and the hubbub of the Italians who all speak loudly and gesticulate. He only needed a pure cigar in his mouth, and he bought it in a store.

Turning a corner, he glanced back, already suspecting that he was being followed. And he wasn't worried, he continued his walk down a poorly lit street with bushes on the edge of the sidewalk. He stopped to light the cigar, and when the light from the match illuminated his face, he felt on his back the pressure of what he guessed was the barrel of a gun.

The assailant made him turn around and spoke to him in Italian. Cramelo calmly, he said to him

--He doesn't speak Italian...! With an accent that was laughable.--  
I speak English.-- With his Tiburcian accent.

--WHAT? The Italian said, who turned to face him again with his threatening gesture. He told him to hand over his wallet. Carmelo slowly lowered his hands and reached towards his wallet pocket. Smiling calmly, he said; -- Look friend, you shouldn't go around scaring people.-- The man insisted on the wallet and stuck the gun in his chest.

--How much do you earn from these assaults? -- The guy was disconcerted by such a question and replied that he didn't give a damn how much he earned.

--I want to know-- Carmelo insisted, -- because I don't think you earn much robbing wallets. It's a bad business. I can propose a better one.--Carmelo really didn't know what he was saying and it was his trick to try to get him out of the way. But he did manage to change the thug's attitude.

--A better business? ... What business?.

--then. Tell me, how much do you earn?-- he insisted

-- quattro o cinquemila lire in una serata fortunata.

-- HaHaHa. Four or five thousand? On a lucky night? You're a damn thief!

-- così è la vita.-- he said dismayed and putting the gun in his waist.

--If you work for me, I'm going to pay you triple

What do I have to do?

Carmelo didn't know what to answer, because he himself didn't know; so he dismissed him and arranged to meet him at the same time and place for the following night. The ruffian turned around and walked away calmly, with the idea of a new and productive job. Carmelo returned to his paradisiacal hotel suite with a smile on his face. He drank two small bottles of whiskey from the private bar and lay down on the sofa worthy of a beautiful Cleopatra. The illusions began to wander through his mind. He repeated the boast of that night in front of the assailant. He was in the land of the mafias that spread throughout the United States and other countries,

controlling, liquors, women, and vices. He remembered the movie *The Godfather*, which praised Vito Carleone's Sicilian mafia. He dreamed of being the capo of the Carmelian Mafia. It was like being King again of that country.

The next morning he asked that breakfast be served on the terrace of his room and enjoyed it smiling at the follies of the night before. --It would be very interesting to have tried it.-- he said in a murmur to hear himself, and shook his head with uncertainty.-- I'm crazy.

That night he did not go to the appointment with the thief, because during dinner he met Lucrecia, a woman in her twenties, with eyes that made her dizzy with her shimmering blue, thick lips that offered the sweetness of her intoxicating breath. Her black hair framed an angelic face and spilled down her neck in a sinuous fall. Her body was not possible to describe, without falling into a virtual paroxysm.

Exactly at 9.30 at night, Carmelo went to open the door, to meet Lucrecia, who looked resplendent in a very elegant dress that made her charms look.

Probably the bust that sprang from a generous neckline, was its best part, was abundant with firmness. They greeted each other with a sweet kiss and came to the table where the bucket with ice and a bottle of Dom Perignon was already waiting. Carmelo elegantly uncorked it and served the glasses. They talked animatedly and Carmelo took the talk to material matters, wanted to know about the underworld in Sicily, and Lucrecia was offended, for being matters that were not of her concern instead of entering into the true purpose of the meeting. And threatened to end the meeting. Carmelo

apologized very embarrassed, telling her that he was interested, because he was a businessman, and to forget the subject, he invited her to dance to the disco in the bar on the ground floor. There they went and they were taken to a table, in the front row on the dance floor. The music was the latest fashion, and dozens of couples danced with joy. Lucrecia from her seat moved her shoulders and her breasts to the rhythm of the strident sound of the place. Carmelo studied the situation and did not dare to dance, at the risk of making a fool of himself. He regretted having made such an invitation instead of

to be dancing naked in bed.

Lucrecia took the initiative and stood up to joyfully pull Carmelo's hand. They mingled with the dancing crowd and Lucrecia began to move with the mastery of a dancer and

Carmelo tried to follow her with clumsy jumps and movements of his arms that did not coincide with his legs. Lucrecia unfolded in provocative turns and gestures that attracted the attention of more than four admirers... Carmelo was

sunk in failure and went to look for the oasis of his table. Shortly after Lucrecia arrived,

--What the hell is wrong with you?-- She snapped at him with a shout to make sure he heard her. --You left me alone, you idiot!

-- It's just that... I can't dance.-- Carmelo exclaimed completely ashamed.

--You should have said that before coming here to make a fool of yourself.-- In a violent movement, she snatched her bag from the chair and stormed out.

Carmelo regretted his mistake of wanting to go out with such a young woman, who undoubtedly was interested in showing off. It was an excessive challenge to try to follow in her footsteps. And he wondered what would have happened in bed. Maybe she would have eaten him whole, like a voracious boa constrictor, And he remembered the failures

previous ones, always with young women. He consoled himself thinking of his days as king, when he could serve himself the best dishes within his reach and emerge victorious at dawn. A long sigh escaped him painfully. He drank the rest of his glass in one gulp and drank Lucrecia's glass to the end, paid his bill and left the place. His ears were ringing from the volume of the disco. He shook his head as he entered his room and felt the delight of the enveloping silence, but also the sensation of

loneliness enveloped him, running down his back with its icy breath.

The next morning he woke up with a feeling of anguish. He had gone out into the world to have fun or at least to live; understanding by living, having adventures, surprises, even dangers, like the ones he had experienced crossing the Sahara desert. Now he felt abandoned by that destiny he had promised himself. So he arrived in his wanderings to the Palermo pier with its hubbub of travelers, stevedores pulling carts of luggage and merchandise. He saw a ferry that launched its bellows announcing its departure to Naples.

1 Naples.

At nine in the morning the next day. Carmelo was already boarding the ferry that by pure coincidence bore the name of "l'avventuriero". A purser led him to his cabin of first class overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea with its captivating deep blue.

In the outer corridors, armchairs with red and blue padding were the best option to enjoy the immensity of the sea. Carmelo refrained from approaching the railings and not running the risk of his fall into the sea being repeated. He laughed openly remembering it.

After having enjoyed a couple of martinis reclining in an armchair and breathing in the sea breeze that instilled tranquility, he felt that he needed to eat and went to the central restaurant.

## 1 Julietta

An attractive waitress with a round face and coppery brown hair, which she wore tied up in a thick bun at the back of her head. With a luminous smile, she offered him the menu. Carmelo took a long time to choose, and the woman offered him her help, with explanations and suggestions. By the end of the meal, Carmelo saw her name on the badge of her uniform, and asked her to tell him what to do in Naples. She painted the city in colors, with its tourist attractions. Carmelo could not avoid asking her to accompany him as his guide in Naples. Julietta said that she could not accept it, because she had to work on the ferry, because she liked her job and did not want to lose it; for her, it was like traveling constantly, even if it was always the same route. Julietta shuddered when Carmelo invited her to dinner that night in Naples. And she accepted, but she had to adjust to her work schedule. Her ferry run was at 9 o'clock at night, and she had to take it.

Carmelo shook his head, denying himself for his audacity, or bad luck. Again he was looking for a relationship with a young woman. But, well, he couldn't help it. That's how they came to him, all alone.

Upon his arrival in Naples, Carmelo waited for Julietta at the foot of the stairs. She was slow to get off and Carmelo came to think that she had regretted it. Half an hour had passed when he heard a voice calling him.

--! Forgive me, Carmelo, please, forgive me! .

Carmelo received her with a hug, seeking her lips, and Julietta turned her face, subtly escaping the kiss to receive it on the cheek and turning it to kiss the other cheek, in the European style.

At 7 o'clock at night to respect their schedules, they entered the restaurant suggested by Julietta.

They spoke extensively in a language that seemed to be invented with each phrase; a mixture of Italian and Spanish. But that worked for them to make themselves understood.

Carmelo had asked her to accompany him on his trip. If she liked to travel, with him she would do it without having to always return to the same places.

Julietta shook her head negatively and took a few seconds looking for an answer. Finally, she looked intensely into Carmelo's eyes, and said;

-- non è possibile signore.

Carmelo insisted.--He offered to dress her like a princess, rides, shows and mainly, to make her happy.

Julietta's eyes radiated light, her head moved in denial. But her mind kept doubting. Finally, she said:--I'll accompany you while you're in Italy, depoi. ..

--! Yes Cara Mia, afterwards we will see what will happen.

They ate quickly, so that Julietta would be on time at the shipping offices to resign from her job. For dessert. Julietta suggested that the next day they should visit Sorrento and then continue north to reach ROME!

Their eyes sparkled, enthusiastic

But they would spend that night in Naples, so Carmelo invited her to his hotel. Julietta was a little surprised, until Carmelo clarified.

-- Well, if we are going to be travel companions, let's start now. --Okay?

Julietta hesitated for a few moments. Carmelo noticed and tried to soften the invitation by telling her that his room had two beds. That changed Julietta's hesitant attitude and she linked her arm with Carmelo's, illuminating her face with a sweet smile.

-- D'accordo . She said with a smile.

Julietta was impressed and very happy when she entered the luxury suite. That simply made her imagine what it would be like to travel with Carmelo and she threw herself into his arms, kissing him ardently.

-- But there is only one bed.--she said, scattering her gaze around the room.

--I just have to order it.-- and he went to the phone. Julietta stopped him gently.

-- No, it is not necessary. He said

They sat keeping as much distance as the Louis XV style sofa allowed. Carmelo served two drinks from the local minibar; they talked about anything, without finding a topic that interested both of them. He served another drink, and slid closer to her. He touched her hands, put his hand on her leg. He felt the smoothness and warmth of her skin. She extended her leg and Carmelo's hand fell on the fine brocade of the sofa.

They both realized that they did not know how to start the rest of the night. She did not want to dare to take the first step, and appear an easy and anxious woman. In front of a man who was twice her age. Carmelo, for his part, doubted that his vigor would fail on that first night of conquest. Julietta, more intelligent, slid her hand over Carmelo's leg and approached until she brought her crimson lips to Carmelo's mouth. The response was an explosion that illuminated the room and took them to the edge of the bed. Their suspicions were broken, and the encounter sailed deliciously.

The night was for both of them like traveling in a paradise of fascinating lust where he discovered the warm abysses, the valleys of infinite smoothness and paths of ardent sinuosity. And she let herself be carried to unknown corners where her moans bounced off the floral curtains like discreet barriers.

The next day at 10 in the morning, they boarded the Da Vinci ship bound for Rome; the journey would take them about 12 hours.

After breakfast, they went to find a sunny spot in the outer corridors of the ship, happily discussing the purpose of their trip and already indulging in the attractions of the Eternal City.

-- But tell me, Carmelo, tell me something about your life. We've only known each other for a few hours, and yet I'm by your side, and it's as if you're a stranger to me. Carmelo paused for a moment before answering and telling her that it was a coincidence that she asked because at that very moment he was asking himself the same question, and he said, tell me about yourself, precious.

-- You first.--she pleaded with a smile.

He squinted as if searching for the words in his memory.-- I was born in Mexico... He began slowly, --still young, I went to seek my fortune in the United States, as thousands and thousands of Mexicans have done in search of fulfilling their dreams of greatness. I was lucky and started working with all my effort to earn enough to live and be able to send money to my parents. Unfortunately, a few years later they passed away without me being able to do anything for them. It hurt me a lot, but I accepted that this is life for some and for others. I returned to Mexico with some money saved, which only served to marry a woman who gave me happiness for a few

years, in which fortunately we had no children, but many limitations. Life in the United States is not easy for emigrants like me. Like all ambitious poor people, I dreamed that a miracle or something similar could happen that would solve my economic problems, and I started buying lottery tickets in the hope that my number would be drawn.

Carmelo saw the waiter and ordered some cocktails to accompany his chat.

And so it was, one day without knowing for sure what was happening I saw myself with the winning ticket in my hands. From one moment to another I had become a MILLIONAIRE!

Julietta exclaimed in surprise and understood how it was possible for Carmelo to offer her the moon and the stars.

Carmelo smiled, nodding firmly. -- That's right, darling, I was a big shot and I went crazy, as is natural for anyone who goes from nothing to a millionaire. I didn't know what to do, and yet I forced myself to think that I had to do something, I couldn't walk the streets with millions in my pocket and living in the same pigsty that I lived in in the days before. I swear I don't know where the idea came from, but I told myself that I wanted to buy a whole country for myself. I had a financial advisor and there you have it, a few weeks later I was at the top of a newly acquired country; it was called San Tiburcio del Sur. Julietta burst into a cheerful laugh, she liked the name and urged Carmelo to continue.

-- go ahead... go ahead.

-- you're going to laugh even more when I tell you that I became by my personal designation as king of a small Central American country

--You're a king? HAHAHA!!

Just like you hear it, I was a king. --ha ha ha-- They both laughed heartily. Carmelo regained his composure, and continued with his story adopting a feigned parsimony.

-- however, that dream of greatness was not what I expected. I did everything I thought was appropriate. The eyes of evil discovered me; offering me a dirty business.

-- What kind of dirty?

-- Yes, because it was about producing drugs, and I didn't accept, Finally, I was no longer having fun being King and I resigned, leaving the throne in the hands of my son. To dedicate myself to traveling and that's how I came to your arms, beautiful Julietta. Now it's your turn, tell me your story.

-- But I don't have much to tell

--Tell... tell-.

--I was born in Naples. My parents were poor peasants. The city was in the hands of the mafia. You were either with them or against them. My father was ambitious and agreed to work as a soldier for the

the Lucciano family, in less than a year he was murdered by the enemies of the famiglia. My mother and I had to flee the country

and we went to take refuge in Tunis where I grew up and my mother joined an Arab with money who gave us a good life, without knowing that one day it would end; when I turned 16 I was already a beautiful young woman and the damn stepfather against my will laid his hands on me, my mother said that I was to blame for being a flirt, without any complaint to her man, it was the way she could preserve her comfort, but not mine. So I escaped from my house and finally Italian, I returned to Sicily to look for work of whatever it was in order to earn a living

honestly. That's how I found the opportunity to work in the ferry shipping company where you met me. And thanks to you, I am now aspiring to a new life. Tears welled up in her eyes that looked with

gratitude to Carmelo's; she took his hands and kissed them sweetly. The ferry continued its march leaving a long white wake where seagulls fluttered in search of some morsel that could arise in the troubled waters or some waste from the ship's kitchen.

The sun was setting on the horizon painting the clouds of capricious shapes with fire. At 9:00 at night the lights of the city of Ostia shone on the horizon, the passengers of the Da Vinci mobilized preparing for disembarkation.

That night after having a delicious pasta in a typical restaurant they walked through the streets to enter the old part of the city that was, many years ago, the port city of Rome on the banks of the Tiber River.

They walked through the ancient directions, which are in perfect condition and give a clear picture of how great it is

that it was the city. His steps on the flagstones polished by time echoed in the darkness. Carmelo felt the weight of time, what had happened over the centuries, and let out a deep sigh without knowing why. His feelings made him shudder, he felt as if he could look into the distant past. Julietta noticed and looked at him with concern asking if he felt well. He did not answer, He was invaded by a feeling of ambiguity that had no explanation. When Julietta insisted, Carmelo shook his head as if at that moment he returned to the present. -- Yes, sorry, I'm fine, I don't know what happened, for a moment I felt a little dizzy, I think that was enough wine for tonight.--he said, as an apology.

They walked until they found a luxury hotel, The night was of a deep sky and covered with bright stars, in the distance on the horizon you could see the glow of the city of Rome, Their next destination. And Carmelo, due to his ancestral fondness for cinema, felt like he was in the Land of cinematography, par excellence he remembered Federico Fellini with his epic films, Marcelo Mastroianni flirting with the most beautiful women on the planet and so many other figures who enriched the seventh art, in its glorious era. But all that belonged to the past. He felt a melancholic blow to his soul, He was also dragging a long past, but he turned his head and looked at the reality of his present; a woman who accompanied him through the streets of Italy. What more could he ask for? He was living his purposes, he had enough money to please himself. Maybe Rome held a surprise for him.

The next day they visited the catacombs of San Gennaro, perfectly preserved as the main tourist attraction of Naples that date back centuries. In front of the niches and crypts that contain the human remains, illuminated by the lights that paint all the gloomy corridors with a yellow that

it makes you feel the loneliness of the dead who spend their eternal rest there in front of the indiscreet gazes of visitors.

Carmelo walked, dragging his feet. Seeing the tombs, he felt the blow of loneliness again. He felt a mysterious force carrying him floating to the end of the ambulatory. Julietta stopped him. She noticed the agitation in his breathing.

--What's wrong, Carmelo?-- She wiped the sweat from his forehead with her handkerchief, and he leaned against the earthy wall.

-- Fear.-- Carmelo said in a whisper

--Fear of what?

--I don't know.

They left the catacombs and looked for a place to have a refreshment.

--Forgive me...

--You worry me, darling.

He took a deep breath a couple of times and assured her that he was alright, but inside him that strange feeling still throbbed, which was repeated when he was in front of a vestige of the past.

Julietta gave him her caresses seeking the tranquility of Carmelo, who could not sleep. What was nesting in Carmelo's mind? She didn't have the slightest idea.

The next day they enjoyed the cheerful streets. Julietta stopped to see a stall that displayed attractive fashions. -- Let's go in, -- she said Carmelo, without hesitating for a moment.

The salespeople greeted them with natural courtesy, and they took Julietta to see the most appropriate models for her. A minute later she came out resplendent wearing a red dress with wide ruffles and a low neckline. Carmel, sitting in front, shook his head negatively. She returned to the dressing room to put on the second option. --It's vulgar.-- Carmelo said. The private fashion show continued. Option after option and so on until Carmelo was fascinated by Julietta's look with a white dress of fine brocade with interwoven silver threads, bare arms, appropriate for the spring season and a neckline that, without being exaggerated, made her beautiful bust look beautiful. Carmelo nodded and said. --We'll take the blue one too.-- And then they went to the shoe department.

Two hours later they left the store with six bags in their hands and overflowing with joy. Julietta had clothes for the day and for the night as well as the splendor for the bed. Then Julietta insisted that Carmelo also renew his wardrobe with another fashionable one. They went into a men's clothing store, and Carmelo resolved the matter in twenty minutes.

After eating, the next day, they boarded the rented car to continue the trip to Rome.

## 1 First call

It took them a little over an hour to pass in front of the

grandiose Roman Colosseum, full of history. They walked through the romantic streets of the bohemian neighborhood of Trastevere. And asking for information, they went to the Esquilino neighborhood, where the best Trattorias are located to enjoy Italian cuisine. Carmelo felt like a King again, without being one, and enjoyed seeing the

happiness that Julietta felt every moment of that trip, which for her was the experience of the first time. He suggested they go to the Vatican. Carmelo didn't like the idea, as he wasn't Catholic, but he agreed to please her.

The next day they visited it, and both were amazed by the Sistine Chapel, St. Peter's Basilica. In the evening, they went to the Opera theater to enjoy The Marriage of Figaro with the precious Ana Netrebko. Julietta, being Italian, had never seen a show of that caliber, and she shed tears of emotion.

Suddenly, and for no reason on the scene, Carmelo let out a loud laugh. Julietta looked at him embarrassed, and with her hands tried to calm him down. Minutes later, Carmelo chanted out of tune at full volume: -- Figaro Yes... Figaro NO... and he wouldn't stop laughing. HA HA HA!

Some theater employees came and asked him to leave the room. Carmelo refused and Julietta left her seat. Carmelo followed her.

At home they discussed the mishap. He explained that he liked the little tune and that's why he sang it, that in general the show

He seemed very funny and couldn't contain his laughter. Julietta did not find that justified his behavior in a crowded place with cultured people.

--Well, I don't think we should give so much importance to the matter. I had fun and that's it. I wish we could go again.

Julietta said to herself - Not even dead! - She refrained from calling Carmelo's outburst a madness.

They spent five days in Rome enjoying so many historical and artistic attractions that a lifetime is not enough to experience them all, but all of Italy is full of these attractions and we had to go in search of other points.

## 1The tragic blow

They set off south to visit Pompeii, the Roman city that was frozen in time after the violent eruption of Mount Vesuvius at the beginning of our era.

Impressed, they toured the walls and vestiges of the residences that were rescued from the ashes volcanic and restored without removing the unique appearance of Roman daily life, with its geometric mosaic floors,

the walls decorated with frescoes from that era, pools for bathing, and houses for grooming and entertainment. Everything was a display of spectacular refinement

Carmelo was paralyzed when he saw the skeletons of people who had been fossilized by fire or ash. In one of them, one could guess from his expression the terror that invaded them in those hellish moments. He felt an icy faintness grip him. His eyes closed, and he continued walking uncertainly. Julietta noticed it immediately and ...

--Mi amore, che ti succede? Carmelo did not respond. He is wandering in another era, many centuries ago. Carmelo walks as if in a semi-unconscious state, stumbles on a stone and falls face down, hitting his head. Julietta runs to help him.

--Good heavens! Carmelo!! -- She lifts his head and lets out a heartbreaking scream when she sees that it is bleeding profusely. She cries out for help.

Carmelo's mind wanders. He was a patriarch traveling in his luxury carriage along the central avenue of Pompeii; the carriage stopped in front of a luxurious residence, from which an elegantly dressed old man comes out to greet him, with his fist on his chest and says;

--Salve Carmelo!!

He heads to the steps of the entrance and Carmelo trips on the first step. He hits his head on a statue, everything goes dark... he is taken to the nearest hospital.

As he leaves the operating room on a stretcher, he is under the effects of anesthesia, and the doctor explains to Julietta that he cannot yet give her a definite diagnosis; they will have to wait about 12 hours. Julietta spent the whole night sitting next to Carmelo's bed, holding his hand and watching the medical monitors. She slept in snatches and woke up alarmed, looking for some reaction from Carmelo. There was no sign of his unconscious state changing.

The next day, after thorough medical tests, the doctor went in search of Julietta, who ran to meet him.

--How is he?

--He is still sedated; we will wake him up in two hours. Be calm, signora.

Those two hours were the longest Julietta had ever spent in her life, but they finally came to an end when the doctor invited her to follow him. Carmelo was prostrate with an uncertain look. Julietta ran to embrace him.

--My love... are you okay?

Carmelo had no reaction; he remained lost in an undefined space. Julietta took his face in her hands to look directly into his eyes.

--Look at me, Carmelo, what's wrong?

--Nothing, why?-- The answer shook Julietta. He calmly explained that he had suffered an accident in Pompeii and was in a hospital.

Carmelo did not alter his expression at all when he asked.

--Pompeii?

-- Yes...Yes1

The doctor, seeing the scene of confusion, understood that it was necessary to intervene. He began to ask her basic questions. What was her name? The date? Carmelo remained impassive, with what he found and others that allowed him to give Julietta an answer.

--The signore is suffering from declared amnesia.

Julietta let out a painful moan.

--We hope it is temporary, global transient amnesia can last around 24 hours, during which time he will need a lot of your help to recover his memory of recent events, not to mention the traumatic ones. In the worst case, it may be a more incisive amnesia, in which he may remember recent events and forget the past; and it could even be the opposite.

A few days later, Carmelo was discharged, the doctor said that there was nothing more to do than wait for his brain to evolve in a few weeks. He recommended a lot of rest for him and a lot of patience for her.

Carmelo docilely let himself be led by Julietta, who took him to an apartment that she rented in Naples when she left Carmelo at the hospital, using the card, she furnished it with the essentials to live the uncertain future.

Carmelo's amnesia never improved and he only lived like a vegetable, repeating 2 or 3 phrases to the point of driving Julietta crazy. The one who was going crazy was Carmelo, who took totally irrational attitudes. He hid under the bed, refused to eat and launched fiery complaints to poor Julietta, who did everything possible to satisfy his whims.

--Why are you angry now?

-- Because I can't find my crown.

--You don't have a crown, amore.

--Yes, I do have a crown.

--No!-- and she left the room inconsolable.

Carmelo's behavior worsened to intolerable limits, so Julietta called a psychiatrist to find some way to solve his problems. The doctor performed a series of tests and analytical tests before reaching an alarming conclusion point

-- I'm sorry to tell you that Mr. Carmelo has lost all his cognitive faculties and his behavior indicates that there is a complete imbalance in his neuronal functions.

Julietta fainted upon hearing the doctor's verdict that sounded like a death sentence; he said she had absolutely no chance of recovery.

--Then what can I do?-- she asked anxiously.

--Unfortunately, madam, there is nothing I can do in these circumstances, so my recommendation would be her admission to a psychiatric hospital where there are specialized doctors with the necessary facilities for adequate treatment.

Julietta collapsed on her bed and cried all afternoon, while the doctor's words repeated in her mind, over and over >> psychiatric hospital << echoed in her head like a gigantic clapper.

Julietta continued the daily struggle with Carmelo, who refused to eat, shouting that he didn't like that, only to ask for food fifteen minutes later. He resisted being cleaned and at night he woke up emitting loud laughter. He said he had dreamed that he was the King. He would get under the bed and there was no way Julietta could convince him to come out, he would come out when he felt like it and announce it with laughter. Then he began to become aggressive. And that's when Julietta had to find a solution, and resigned herself to following the doctor's advice. She looked for the Psychiatric Hospital

It took the intervention of 3 male nurses to get him into the ambulance. Because Carmelo resisted strenuously; they took him to the Lambertini di Nápoli hospital.

Julietta accompanied him to instill some confidence and prevent him from continuing to resist.

She filled out the necessary information for his admission in front of the hospital director. She asked that he receive special attention, but the doctor said that there were no such distinctions and that the appropriate treatment would be based on his condition and behavior.

Julietta insisted and handed over Carmelo's VINSA card to cover the necessary expenses until his monetary capacity was reached.

## 1A mental asylum

Carmelo was installed in a room with cold white walls, provisionally, for all the furniture he had a bed of insolent tubes holding a meager mattress with a malnourished cushion.

Julietta left the hospital completely devastated. The life that destiny had provided her, full of comforts and happiness, had been lost in a few days. It seemed like a curse of cruel fate. He was the first man she had truly fallen in love with. And she didn't even have a caress left to console her.

At the hospital, they changed Carmelo's furniture for another less worn and added a small table with a vase with artificial flowers., his treatment began. Routines and schedules of the

essential activities, Carmelo did not submit. He asserted that he was the king and did not accept submissions, the result was a cold water bath with a vile hose. He didn't want to eat? Well, don't eat, and he didn't eat until hunger overcame him.

On Julietta's third visit, it was difficult for her to recognize him. She found him emaciated to the bone, trembling, with a look of anguish that could break even a heart of stone. Julietta insisted until she gave up. He did not recognize her, nor did he find any incentive for the visit of a

stranger. He did not want to listen to the pleas, he did not respond to the caresses... Nor was he moved by the bitter tears of the woman he had loved.

It was the final blow, a precise blow that destroyed all of Julietta's hopes for his recovery.

She never saw him again, it was useless to continue tormenting herself. She handed over the apartment and returned to Sicily to look for a job as a waitress. The flame of aspiring to a better life had been extinguished by a breath of destiny.

## 1The King Forever

Six months later in the psychiatric hospital, amidst chilling howls and strange vociferations, Carmelo circulated through the corridors along with the other patients, repeating to each one he crossed paths with, "I am the king of this swarm of unconscious stateless persons. HA HA HA... HA!"

END.