Beneath the Water

Por debajo del agua

CHAPTER I

Chapter I

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English-language edition
The Purple Notebook

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The Purple Notebook

CHAPTER I

Chapter I

If one closes one's eyes and has sufficient imagination, it is possible to hear vanished conversations in old buildings. It is true that every before and after happens at the same time, for several years ago, in an officers' club unused since the administration of President Calles, I heard the following question amid the dust-filled silence:

"What happened, General? Did your woman leave you?"

He was a sparsely mustached Indigenous man - that was how I imagined him at first - and his voice was a kind of murmur sweating from the walls and wooden floors.

"What happened, General? Did your woman leave you?"

The question remained there, floating.

Another day, several months later, I learned from a photograph dated 1921 that the man was named Ramiro Rangel and that, during the first years of Álvaro Obregón's presidency, he had devised an enormous scandal to harm an enemy of his chief, General Federico Quintero.

According to the history of the Revolution and the history of my family, which converge here, Rangel's scheme was intended not for political gain but for personal revenge. He was a simple man whose short sight kept him out of Mexico's history, even though his voice remained there, floating in the indiscreet building.

And it would still be there, unclaimed, had it not been for the unforeseen circumstance that took me to that bar just as something was about to explode beneath the floors, behind the walls, among the stairways, like the stomach of a dead cat releasing not a bitter odor but the voice of Ramiro Rangel.

"What happened, General? Did your woman leave you?"

In another decade - another millennium, even - I learned that the cantina was to be demolished. I thought everything would remain that way, as a strange story of murderous voices and family scandals, the kind we do not tell even to our drinking companions. On October 6, 2001, however, a report appeared in the newspaper El Economista: CALLS TO REOPEN THE CASE OF GENERAL FEDERICO QUINTERO'S MURDER. The soldier's family sought access to the files in order to prove the guilt of Plutarco Elías Calles and Álvaro Obregón.

The article discusses the removal of the actual killer, Undersecretary of War Pablo Aguirre, whom the president himself protected from prison and scandal.

I already knew all of this. The only truly interesting thing was the illustration: a half-page photograph that completes the meaning of the question trapped in the officers' club.

It is - I am looking at it now - a previously unpublished image of General Aguirre. Rangel's question - what happened, General, and so on - was addressed precisely to him. In other words, it is assumed that Pablo Aguirre's woman left him.

For some stylistic reason, the newspaper's designers decided to tint it blue. There is Pablo in 1921: white skin and brown hair, mustache and hair neatly combed, the latter arranged above all to conceal his boyish face. He cannot be more than twenty-five in this photograph.

Beside Pablo stands a woman who would attract attention in any age. She is Isabel. It is not that her features are extraordinary. If one considers them, they are actually quite simple. There is, however, an exact, one might almost say provocatively mathematical, balance among the sizes and forms of each of her features: nose, mouth, eyes. The photograph plainly arrested the instant before a kiss they must have exchanged amid laughter and play, the kind we share with lovers who are also our best friends.

Besides voices heard in dreams, in buildings about to collapse, and this newspaper article that appears beside my breakfast coffee, there is a third reason for my interest in the intrigue that ended the relationship between Isabel and Pablo and led to the murders of Hugo Estrada and Federico Quintero. For reasons of literary mechanics, I shall leave this last reason, undoubtedly the most forceful, until the end.

It is not a matter of surprises or stylistic acrobatics. I simply need more time to reflect before passing judgment on my own past and on everything that has led me to take an interest in a pair of events that occurred almost a century ago, during Isabel's childhood.

In any case, on the night these stories culminated - that of Pablo and Hugo on one side, and Pablo and Isabel on the other - General Aguirre put an end not only to Quintero; with a single stroke he also tore out the roots of his entire military career.

Throughout his political journey, Pablo had remained loyal to Obregón's army. Without intending it, with these deaths he sent his past as a hero of Celaya to hell. As if that were not enough, that same night Aguirre also murdered his best friend.

Now I look at the photograph of Aguirre. I imagine the officers' club where his life slipped away: the blinds open, and there is no dust or dampness. It smells of sweat and tobacco, and a little dawn light filters through the windows.

Rangel approaches. The general has lost his boyish smile. He is aged, although he is not yet thirty. He has drunk a great deal and wants more.

Rangel is troubled by scruples, and perhaps that is why, pretending not to understand what is happening, he comes and asks:

"What happened, General? Did your woman leave you?"

Pablo smiles. The corporal has broken formalities. When Aguirre invites him, Rangel sits and pours a large drink.

"What are you worried about, General?" Rangel spits. "Now we have every woman in the city for ourselves! Women are the one thing we have in abundance, General!"

The boyish look returns to Pablo.

He answers as he downs another drink:

"None like Isabel, Ramiro. None like Isabel."

What does Pablo Aguirre's voice sound like?

I imagine it chipped by all the shouting and rage of that afternoon. And Hugo's?

Hugo Estrada is Pablo's best friend; they met in childhood. But let us not get ahead of ourselves. We were speaking of their voices, not their personal histories.

Here is the general in an officers' club, taking possession of a drunken speech, agitated like a madman telling himself:

I have just killed my best friend. It is not that I care very much, but there is dust and a noise carrying everything away inside me. It is something I never felt before. As if I had stopped seeing.

I have just killed my best friend! I do not care to remember his name, and I do not regret it either. I did it eagerly. I was enraged. Sad too. A little. And now I have stopped seeing.

I have just killed my best friend, and the music outside, where everything goes on as if nothing had happened, is so strange: closing my eyes because there is no point in keeping them open, and no longer caring that I am blind.

I have just killed my best friend because I felt like it and because I am General Aguirre! Now I want to drink more and more. Much more.

No one tells me how far I may go, and I want this dog to come out from behind the bar and pour me another drink right here.

"Yes, General!"

I have just killed my best friend... because I am a tremendous bastard and every inch a man and nothing matters to me. I am drunk, and I will remain drunk until the smell of

gunpowder and dried blood leaves me in peace. Let this dog come and clean the boot Hugo smeared with his blood! I do not care about being alone or rotting in Hell. I believe neither in God nor Hell nor death, and I know I shall never die. General Aguirre will never die! I want you all to know it! Death is a tale told by stupid old women to frighten perfumed children like Hugo, who not long ago... not long ago at all... you were only thirteen...

In 1912 Hugo Estrada was thirteen and still wore stockings, short trousers, and a tilted beret when he met the future General Aguirre. The war, the Revolution, was far away: far from the Jesuit school, the clubs, and the country house at San Agustín.

Pablo accompanied his father to spend a weekend with the Estradas. In the morning they took a streetcar to Huipulco. From there, a mule cart carried them up Correos Street to the center of Tlalpan. As they passed beneath the arcades, the smell of fritters called to them.

The church is crowded with repentant consciences; in the square, children hawk La Prensa, and Pablo stares in surprise at boys of sixteen or seventeen wearing dragoon capes, kepis, and military uniforms. They are conscripts from the Academy for Officer Candidates at Tlalpan. Before long they will rise against Madero.

At last, cutting through a flock of pigeons in the center of the square, Pablo and his father reach an estate behind the former home of Carlota, empress of Mexico.

Pablo's father walks quickly. He has been seeking this invitation for some time. He wants money from Señor Estrada. They have long been friends and plan ventures involving mines and treasure. They never made their great strike, of course, and now the Revolution is sweeping away all their bourgeois illusions.

Hugo's family has declined considerably, but the house at San Agustín is still very impressive. It is an old building with

high ceilings, inhabited by ghosts, a grand piano, stone walls, horses.

If one leaves by the back door and walks toward the square, one finds other estates and haciendas with gravel paths flanked by green palms.

At night the crickets make noise, and in the mornings crows caw.

Who knows why I remember, Pablo, that on the night before you came, my brother and I had climbed onto the roof to smoke. From there we saw the church tower. We kept out the cold by wrapping ourselves in serapes and making fun of the nursemaid's hips. Then, serious, we talked about something I cannot remember, about when my mother left and something Carlos said about the nails of Christ.

My brothers and sister - Daniel, Carlos, and Isabel - and everyone in the house knew that the Irishmen, you and your father, had come to ask us for money. But with the war and the expenses and everything else, what could they get from us?

Ever since my mother left, all my father did was spend money on alcohol and in the Tlalpan clubs. The estate was fine, but who could buy it?

At luncheon, my twin and I made fun of you because you sat so straight at the table, trying to make yourself taller and more serious.

Later that night, Isabel told me, "Your godfather's son is a nuisance," as if it were my fault. I said nothing about what had happened in the garden after the meal.

And I owe you this: there at San Agustín you taught me something so obvious, something that carried away everything old and useless - my brothers' pain when my mother left, the tiresome sun and rain in Tlalpan, the creaking of my father's steps as he climbed the stairs.

It was something that eased my shame, because, I do not know... Before I met you, Pablo, I did not think it could exist.

Isabel was the one who told me that what you had shown me was called the future.

At the center of the park on the Estrada estate stands a thick-trunked tree. Its leaves shelter a pond formed by the rain.

In this pond, beneath the water, every manner of creature has appeared.

Hugo and Pablo hunt a toad, catch grasshoppers, and later stare openmouthed at the clumsy progress of a praying mantis.

There is a March wind and, in the afternoon, a sudden storm. Hugo takes shelter beneath the tree even though an overseer has told him that one day lightning will split him there... But I do not intend to get wet, he tells himself.

Pablo, by contrast, pays no attention to the water. In fact, he likes getting wet. He does not interrupt his game of loading and firing an imaginary rifle at invisible hosts.

Suddenly, moved by some very basic instinct, by something he never fully understood, Pablo seizes Hugo by the arm and pulls him into the rain. They wrestle, body to body, and smear themselves with mud.

The toad they caught takes advantage of the reversal and escapes, tumbling across the grass.

Pablo is stronger. He pins Hugo, sits on his chest, and begins to tickle him. The boy is about to die laughing. Rain enters his eyes, shoes, trousers, stockings, and shirt. His whole body is full of water. Pablo brings his mouth close and lets out a thread of saliva that moves back and forth like a threatening snake.

Kicking the air, Hugo shakes his head.

"Let me go!"

He laughs and struggles, fighting with his bare, scraped knees. Pablo stops. The saliva returns to his mouth. They fall silent.

They remain there for a while, looking at each other, so close they can smell their clothes and damp skin.

"Damn it," Aguirre says.

Surprised, Hugo looks into the other boy's blue eyes. He would like to know what unforgivable defect Pablo has found in him.

"How I wish you had been a girl."

And Pablo lies beside Hugo upon the grass, without fear or remorse, caressing his hair and drinking the water that comes from the sky.

In the downtown cantina demolished not long ago, the drunken Ramiro Rangel and General Aguirre untangle the intrigues of their revolutionary loves.

Some have wished to see in Rangel a kind of Iago acting from malice. I do not think the corporal possessed such dramatic stature. He was far simpler in every respect.

If we keep to the facts and set imagination aside, events are fairly straightforward: Pablo and Hugo met through their fathers' friendship during a weekend in 1912. The following year they worked together in an engraving shop that belonged to Miguel Ángel Estrada.

I know from family accounts that Don Miguel was an old man with Porfirian aspirations who swore he descended from viceregal nobility.

The Estradas' possessions included a country house at San Agustín, today Tlalpan, another on Versalles Street, some jewels, paintings by Cabrera, and accounts at the Bank of London and Mexico. It seems that when his wife - Hugo's mother, named Isabel like his twin - ran off with a man unknown to me, Miguel Ángel Duque de Estrada, as he signed his name with DUKE very large and proud, found consolation in alcohol. He separated himself from his brothers and cousins. Perhaps from shame, who knows. He never saw anyone again.

In 1913, Don Miguel supports himself with only one business: the printing shop where his son Hugo sealed his lifelong friendship with the future General Pablo Aguirre.

This printing shop, located from 1911 to 1920 on Bucareli Street across from the Chinese Clock, was managed by Rubén Romero, a reputable man who remained beside Miguel Ángel Estrada despite his character and circumstances.

Half-inked government proclamations must have been scattered everywhere inside Don Rubén's shop. Thanks to the warlike times, they found work printing appeals and posters inviting civilians to join the new president in his struggle against the Zapatistas.

When I think of the workshop, the odors of ink, machine oil, and the sweat of seven apprentices come to mind. Hugo and Pablo are among them.

The noise is loud, constant, hypnotic.

"Hugo!" Don Rubén shouts.

"Yes, sir!"

"Just look at those shoes."

"What's wrong with my shoes?"

"They're far too clean. I suspect they're new! Shall we give them their soaking? What do you say?"

The r in his mouth is light and threatening.

"Listen, everyone! The young gentleman here is wearing new shoes. Who wants to give them their soaking?"

"Ehhhh!"

The apprentices abandon their tasks and, as if answering a call to war, descend upon Hugo's feet, trampling them and covering them with mud from their own shoes. The boy endures it with some stoicism.

"Enough! Enough!" Don Rubén calms them. "Back to work, bastards. And you, Hugo... instead of going around perfumed, you should be drawing, shouldn't you? Or why did your father put you here?"

The boy wipes his shoes on the backs of his trouser legs.

"Well, I inked the bald-heads' poster all by myself."

"Bald...? The bald-heads? What do you want, boy? For them to come and question me? We are speaking of the soldiers of the Mexican army."

"The point is that I alone inked the proclamation for the Me xican-army-that-fights-the-filthy-hat-wearing-louse-ridden-tr aitors-to-the-nation."

"That's much better."

Pablo smiles with Hugo.

"I saw you, you bastards. Don't roll your eyes at me! What did I want you for? Ah, yes! Bring down the movable type from set four, there on the blue shelf."

He snaps his fingers.

"Quickly, Hugo. I haven't got all your time!"

The boy runs.

In the darkest part of the workshop, where the apprentices say La Llorona appears at night, an enormous shelving unit stands. Hugo climbs it from a leather stool.

A rat looks up at him with an air of superiority.

When Hugo returns with the case of type, another apprentice repairing the belly of a greasy machine sticks out his leg, sending boy and type crashing to the floor. Hugo begins throwing punches. A general battle breaks out.

"Now, boys, stop this uproar!" Don Rubén shouts, short of breath.

Impossible. Pablo defends Hugo, who kicks and strikes. Everyone takes a side. They shout and enjoy themselves. It is a good fight.

Then everyone falls silent.

The workshop's owner, Miguel Ángel Estrada, enters. Only Rubén keeps laughing, even though he has stained his favorite coat lemon-yellow with ink.

"Just look at the commotion your boy started," he says good-humoredly.

Tall and serious, Don Miguel bends to look his son in the eyes.

"Can't you remain still for an instant?"

Mocking laughter.

"And you? Have you forgotten that we play poker today?" he asks the master of the workshop.

"That's right! Cards today at Don Fernando's house."

Miguel Ángel Estrada nods and casts a fresh threat at his son:

"I'll settle accounts with you at home."

Don Rubén looks at the boy with compassion and intercedes:

"I thought it might be better... if Hugo and Pablo stayed to work, don't you think? I believe they were both to blame. Isn't that right, Pablo?"

Pablo says yes.

"Besides," Rubén continues, "they have to finish the engraving for the bald-heads."

"The bald-heads."

"That is, the soldiers. The government!"

Don Miguel leaves the workshop, glaring.

"Well, boys," the master says, "I'm leaving the business in your hands, and I hope you put this whole mess in order. I'm off with my friend to seek the face of fortune" - he thinks and concludes - "and if possible, we'll also seek Don Fernando's face. Damn right we will!"

He leaves, laughing heartily.

The city has emptied very early.

Punished, Hugo and Pablo are still drawing sketches and engraving plates in the workshop.

Their thumbs hurt.

The rat living in the darkest and most mysterious corner has finished several crusts of bread. Still half hungry near the shelf of movable type, it raises its face. It looks at the boys with yellow eyes and a certain proud expression. Self-assured, it ventures near the tables where they work.

"What was that?" Hugo asks when he hears the tiny paws rummaging through paper in the wastebasket.

His voice is thin. A glassy radiance falls behind his shoulders: the glow of the gas lamp in the street illuminating the roof tiles along Bucareli.

"A rat," Pablo answers, remembering the rainy afternoon beneath a tree in Tlalpan, where there is a pond full of creatures.

Pablo feels the same sensation as a year earlier, when he first saw Hugo at San Agustín: a light, hot burning rising through his torso.

The future General Aguirre's eyes cling to Hugo, become entangled in the shadow of his hair and in the lashes descending as if slipping over cheekbones and nose.

"It's already ten," Pablo says, merely to say something.

"Look!"

Hugo shows him the sketch for a new proclamation from Madero's government.

"It's good," Pablo confirms, "although this part came out a little crooked."

"Crooked?"

"It's fine."

"Perhaps the trouble is I made the face too square, don't you think?"

Pablo shrugs and returns to his work. He wants to remain silent, but voices struggle inside him to break the silence. They want to tell Hugo the only thing he truly needs: that he wants Hugo to come and tear away the burning in his stomach, the tingling rising through his legs.

"Better?" Hugo asks after a while.

"Better."

They smile at each other. Simple smiles. There seems to be nothing special in them. They are friends, aren't they? Nothing more.

"What time did your brother say he would come?"

"At twelve," Hugo answers.

"At twelve..."

Pablo crosses his arms on the drawing table. Resting that way, he feels the blow of his pulse. He does not quite know what to say until:

"You know something?" he says at last.

Concentrating on his work, Hugo does not hear the nervousness in Pablo's voice.

"You know, the other day..."

"What happened?"

"I was talking with a friend... Do you remember Federico?"

"Colonel Quintero's son?"

"Exactly! We were talking, you know? And do you know what 'to know' means?"

"To know?" Hugo asks in surprise.

He raises his eyes and looks at Pablo.

"I know what it means, but I can't explain it to you right now."

"No! Not 'know' the way you're imagining. I mean in the Bible. Do you know? Have you read the Bible?"

"No... One shouldn't read it unless a priest explains it, should one?"

Hugo has begun to suspect something.

"That doesn't matter! In the Bible it says that when one knows, it is..."

At last Hugo bursts out laughing, for a gesture of the hands has made him understand what Pablo means.

"Fornication?"

"More or less."

"Ah, like Adam and Eve?"

"Exactly. Like Adam and Eve."

The silence becomes light. Words flow of their own accord.

"You've never known anyone?"

"No. Have you?"

"I have," Pablo says proudly. "It feels good, warm."

The workshop rat rummages near the apprentices' feet. It walks close to the trap, coming and going as it challenges the metal jaws.

"Would you like... to know?"

"Here?"

"No one ever goes behind the workshop."

"Now?"

Hugo swallows.

"Yes..."

Their voices became light. They feared themselves, although they did not know quite what would happen. Heat pulsed in their temples, palms, and feet.

They were also a little afraid of God, of confession the following Sunday, of the future. But they went and lit a tallow wick for a candle. Dry cold emerged from the walls. A serape covering an old adobe mold hung from the ceiling and served as a bed. There was a broken window and, upon the table, a crucified Christ, which Pablo covered. Then he sat on the bed and drew Hugo by the waist. The ropes supporting the mold creaked. They began to sway.

Aguirre embraced Hugo at chest level. He remained that way for a while, looking at the blue and red flame, thinking about what he was going to do. He heard Hugo's heart pounding and said so:

"It sounds as if your heart is about to burst out."

They approached each other until they were so close that they exchanged a discreet kiss, then untied and unbuttoned. They undressed, and when the final garment fell, the cold was the first caress.

They touched and kissed, while in the distance music could be heard from a party in one of the houses along Bucareli.

In January 1913, Pablo Aguirre and Hugo Estrada touched each other in fear, but they touched nonetheless. The streetlamp vibrated outside, and Hugo heard a blow and came

back to himself with a start. Nothing. Only a shiver, a memory of the ghost: the Hanged Man. Nothing more.

The business in the back room has just ended. They enjoyed themselves, but it did not last long. They had not intended it to last long either. The tallow wick is spent, and the yellow-eyed rat is about to die in the trap.

The boys have returned to their worktables.

"Another one," Hugo says, and hears the trap's jaws break the rat's neck.

He conceals the nervousness caught in his throat. Pablo says nothing. He is absorbed in his work and thoughts.

"What's wrong?" Hugo asks. "Cat got your tongue?"

After a while, it becomes clear that the silence that has fallen is not the silence of two friends or two lovers. It is a mortifying silence that permits no relaxation.

"Why are you like that?" Pablo asks.

"Like what?"

Pablo has returned from a reflection, a long journey inside his head. He seems different from the boy who went into the back room to touch Hugo. The Pablo here now is very different.

"Like that. A faggot."

"I don't know," Hugo answers, considering it with complete sincerity. "But what about you?"

"I don't want to talk about that, all right?" the new Aguirre says.

Pablo feels tired. It is not an unpleasant sensation, but his mind turns without rest and directs fear against all the pleasure left in his body.

"Aren't you angry?"

"No."

Pablo is about to explode.

"Then what they say in the workshop is true: you're leandro. Everyone says so, even your brother."

"Don't bring my brother into this, all right?"

Although Pablo would like to continue hurling accusations, he falls silent. He returns to his work, a little more relaxed. After all, the other boy is the odd one, the strange one. He merely succumbed to a temptation as insignificant as touching himself beneath the blankets or stealing a chocolate. He will tell the priest on Sunday.

Pablo's Irish father has accustomed him to attend Mass every Sunday, and before Communion he must confess even the smallest fault. Now he wonders what he will say, because he senses he has a great one to report. Since the matter with Federico, he has not appeared with anything of comparable magnitude.

In any case, the few accusations he has thrown at his friend have lightened the burden and made him feel much better. It was a kind of children's game, wasn't it? Nothing serious. Hugo can even remain his friend, provided he does not endanger Pablo's immortal soul, because otherwise...

"What time is your brother coming?" he asks again, flirtatiously looking into his eyes.

"At twelve. I already told you," Hugo answers crossly.

"And what is wrong with you now?"

"And if I were leandro, what then? What would happen if I were leandro? Would you stop being my friend? Stop greeting me in the street?"

Pablo cannot believe the coldness with which so grave a matter is being treated. To be leandro is to violate the laws of God, isn't it?

"It's your problem whether you're leandro or not," Aguirre says. "I'm not like that... I will not be like that!"

"But you are."

Aguirre raises his eyes.

"I'm not leandro, not even a little!"

"And a short while ago?"

There are questions before which it is impossible to lie to oneself. Hugo knows them well. With his boy's face, he asks

something that cannot be set aside, not because there is no answer.

Isabel was the same.

"Shhh. You'd better keep working. It will be twelve soon, and your brother will come."

Outside, the smell of horse excrement and urine mingles with the scent of night dew and wet floors. Because many streets are unpaved and drainage is primitive, there are floods and mud everywhere, giving off a damp cold. The apprentices' feet grow cold in the workshop as they draw without speaking or looking at each other. The moon lights the square of the Chinese Clock, which strikes twelve as the silence between Hugo and Pablo is exhausted. Then a shadow leaps from the back room. Both boys freeze. Carlos, Hugo's brother, has emerged from the room where everything just happened. He is drunk and in good spirits.

"Come on, fledglings! Why so frightened?"

"Where were you?" Pablo asks in terror.

"How did you get in? Do you have a key?"

"What's wrong with you two? It's no great matter. I climbed through the broken window. What's the problem?"

Their nerves relax. The instant passes in which they imagined Carlos had been present, judging the most intimate moment of their lives.

"Can someone tell me what's wrong with everyone?" Carlos says thickly. "I also had to work after this whole business of the war began, and when I came to the workshop, I didn't have a brother to bring me dinner..."

Carlos pauses melodramatically.

"Nor a friend!"

He climbs onto Don Rubén's table and takes from his leather satchel a basket of tacos and a little glass bottle full of pulque.

Philanthropically, the young man distributes the tacos:

"One for you, one for you... and two for me."

He eats happily.

"Enjoy! The point is, I think I did have a friend: Pata!"

He passes the pulque to his brother, who takes a drink and hands it to Pablo.

"Pata was true blue. Too bad his parents went to the land of the gringo! They claim it's because they're going to invade us."

"Who?" Pablo asks.

"The gringos."

"They took him away to invade us?"

"What do I know?"

"What nonsense," Hugo says.

"And a lie," Pablo confirms.

Carlos eats without taking his eyes from them and comments with his mouth full:

"You say that because you're a gringo!"

"My father is Irish, not a gringo," Pablo defends himself. "Besides, he brought me here when I was five!"

He takes a large bite of taco and then, burned by the chile, a good swallow of pulque.

"You don't even know how to eat chile," Hugo says.

"Of course I do!"

"Now, children," Carlos interrupts. "Don't quarrel over such nonsense. I bring good news."

He finishes the taco, drinks all the pulque in one swallow, and begins:

"My sweetheart..."

"The whore?"

Hugo and Pablo ask at the same time, surprised and half joking, laughing.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that idiotic remark... Where was I? Ah, yes. My sweetheart, Miss Miranda..."

Hugo and Pablo look at each other. There is a little complicity, and it seems they might remain together all their lives.

"...invites us to swim at the Ester Pool." Carlos pauses and gives Pablo an accusing look. "Even our foreign enemies."

"The Ester Pool?"

They are excited.

"Exactly! My sweetheart is a close friend of Miss Ester, who has just brought some dancers from Argentina." Carlos lowers his voice as though sharing a secret. "They say they perform a dance... a lascivious dance..."

"What's that?"

"What do I know? The point is, we're all going, and for the occasion Miss Miranda has given me ten pesos in copper and silver so we can buy everything we need for a grand day out."

"Ten pesos? Magnificent."

"One moment. We must save some to buy her something, a trinket, what do I know?"

Carlos stores seven pesos in a little purse and spreads the rest, along with several other coins from his satchel, upon the table.

"Hugo has been appointed by this committee minister of the treasury, and you, Pablo, will be responsible for obtaining plates, salt, and, of course, aguardiente."

"Aguardiente?"

"Gentlemen! Despite your tender years, I am doing you the favor of inviting you upon an adult excursion. You must rise to the occasion. Understood?"

He smiles at Pablo.

"Don't tell me you've never stolen a little of Don Rubén's aguardiente. Everyone knows he keeps it behind the cabinet with the photographs!"

All three are happy. Nothing more need be said. That was Carlos's virtue, or so I have been told. He could be rather foolish, but he was capable of making the bitterest person happy, and above all for that reason women adored him.

"I'll take care of my father," he says suddenly, as if remembering a nightmare. "Everything all right, Hugo?"

"Everything's fine."

"Then it's settled. And you, Pablo, we'll expect you at seven on Sunday behind the house on Versalles, all right? Good. Settled."

The final drops of pulque slide lazily through the little glass bottle onto Carlos's tongue. Then he puts away the basket and climbs down from the table that served as a platform for his harangue.

"It's time! Let's go, Hugo. Are you coming, Pablo?"

"He's sleeping here."

"Then be very careful, little brother, of the Hanged Man," Carlos says, "or La Llorona, who is worse."

Pablo answers the warning with a gesture indicating that La Llorona and the Hanged Man can both go to hell. Carlos and Hugo leave laughing.

Outside the workshop everything seems new. The rain has washed the street, and it smells good.

Carlos and Hugo walk toward home. They like the night and the chiming of the Chinese Clock. After a silent stretch, Hugo asks:

"Do you truly think La Llorona exists?"

"Of course she does."

Hugo's shoes become muddy at the crossing.

"Is she like the Devil?"

"Much worse!"

"Then, Carlos, do you think she carries queers away too?"

Carlos grows serious. He embraces Hugo and says:

"I don't think so, brother. I don't know. I truly don't know."

The memory of Hugo remains floating in the workshop's back room, and Pablo does not know what to think. As soon as Hugo left, he began to miss him. He spread a serape over the bed. The ropes squealed under his weight. He closed his eyes and saw the images on which he had worked all afternoon: soldiers, rifles, uniforms, letters and... he sighs. Hugo's body,

the body caressing him. He wishes he could think of something else.

Hugo is already in bed staring at his bedroom ceiling, believing he sees Pablo. Carlos turns out the light.

"Oh, my children... La Llorona is coming for you," Hugo jokes.

"Shut up, you bastard!" Carlos shouts. "I want to sleep at least three hours!"

Pablo turns over in the back room and adjusts the pillow. He extinguishes the candle with two fingers, and there in the dark, flashes of color appear: the federal soldiers from Don Rubén's proclamations take form.

The future general closes his eyes. He dreams and fearfully remembers the proverb he learned at San Agustín: Beneath the Water.

Hugo dreams of rain falling from the sky and filtering over the bed, water overflowing from a sea far away. He dreams that the workshop floods, that the streets of Mexico City flood and carry him beyond Versalles and Bucareli. Pablo dreams too, of a spring bathing him; when it has completely filled the back room, he sees himself swimming in the Ester Pool, far from the eyes of God and the Sunday priest. He is surprised that he needs no air in order to be happy. It is like flying beneath the water, because beneath the water, anything is possible. Everything is so comfortable.

Touching beneath the water. Touching in the Ester Pool.

They have gone swimming and to meet Argentine dancers who perform a kind of erotic dance. That dance, Margarita told them softly, heats men and perverted women. It is called the tango.

Thus Pablo and Hugo, forgetting the future, swim in the Ester Pool, very popular in those years. The bathing establishment's fame lasted until the 1950s. The outing with Hugo and his brother is not, of course, recorded in any archive of the Revolution, but it seems just to give this tormented man

the pleasure of being a child again. After all, he was not born a hero; he did not suddenly appear haranguing half-dead soldiers at Celaya or murdering Federico Quintero. Like everyone, he too was a child and had that dream that resembles swimming: moving as if beneath the water. And in the Ester Pool he was only that, a child who suddenly enjoys himself enormously.

In this immensity of water, it is possible to forget everything. Sounds become nostalgia below, and images dissolve as the water's accomplices. The half-naked body delights in a primitive caress.

At the bottom of the pool, light plays with dry leaves lost long ago. The deepest part disappears into a hazy cloud. Looking at the sky from below amuses him. The faces of Carlos and Marga are distorted, and Hugo...

Hugo suddenly appears halfway across the pool.

"There you are!" Pablo shouts.

"Now all you have to do is catch me, you damned monkey."

War has thrown Mexico into dismay. An atmosphere of mourning is everywhere, and it suddenly contrasts here with the happiness of these four: Hugo and Pablo, Carlos and Margarita.

Carlos met Marga in a brothel serving the extinct Porfirian middle class. In the present state of feeling among the capital's inhabitants, there is no need to preserve appearances. They kiss and drink beside the pool, breaking every social rule, the rules of a Mexico that suddenly disappeared.

In any case, two people kissing would have attracted attention even several decades later, but Carlos and Marga do not care what others say, and their companions care still less.

Marga has agreed to a relationship with Carlos because it reassures her as a woman that she still possesses the charms to seduce so young a man. Besides, several photographs of Carlos survive among the family pictures I have seen, and it is clear that he could have seduced any woman in any age.

As for Hugo's brother, Marga is surely the perfect outlet for a libido that was overflowing. With his prostitute sweetheart, Miguel Ángel Estrada's eldest son assumes the airs of a great lord. He feels confident, loved, and heard, and, to make matters still better, indulged in an incipient alcoholism that matured over time.

It is also clear from what happened later that Margarita set the relationship's course. She decided for both of them, and when Don Miguel lost his last courage, it was her money that supported Hugo's brothers. Who would have imagined it? In the end, a whore prevented the memory of a surname from being lost, a name reaching back to those nobles who lie in the church of Dolores in Mexico City's Historic Center.

At the pool, Carlos drinks large quantities of cheap strong liquor and kisses Margarita.

"Where is your brother?" she asks.

"I don't know. Playing with Pablo over there."

"Listen, shall we have some hot broth?"

"Very hot?" Carlos asks, excited and drunk.

"Very hot!"

On the other side of the pool, Hugo and Pablo have stopped their hunting game and sit on the edge, swinging their feet. They hug themselves against the cold.

"What could your brother have seen in Marga?" Pablo asks.

"I don't know. Her buttocks?"

"What nonsense! Buttocks are precisely what she lacks. Perhaps her tits, because they nearly pull her onto her face, but her buttocks?"

Marga and Carlos stop their own game. From the other side of the pool, they look toward the laughing, talking boys. Carlos seems worried. Marga consoles him.

"Aren't you angry anymore?" Pablo asks.

"Are you?" Hugo answers, looking at his feet beneath the water.

"I don't know. What we do isn't right. The priest told me."

"You told a priest?"

"He made me say a hundred Our Fathers and five hundred Hail Marys."

"Let's see if it works!"

"I promised we would never do it again."

"All right," Hugo answers resignedly. "We'll never do it again."

"Is that a promise?" Pablo asks fearfully.

Hugo raises his hand.

"I promise."

They both swore. They felt good at that moment, but afterward they did it again, not once but many, many times.

According to the records of the Academy for Officer Candidates at Tlalpan, Pablo Aguirre's godfather, Captain Manuel Antonio Quintero Salgado, father of Federico Quintero, was the man who recommended his admission to the Tlalpan school rather than the Military College at Chapultepec. Thanks also to his godfather, as soon as he became a cadet he was able to erase every trace of his Irish surname, which turned him into a purely Mexican soldier.

In 1913, Aguirre is about to turn sixteen. He is the perfect age to enter the Academy, whose specialty is filling command posts in the tottering federal army.

After several months of hurried instruction, Cadet Aguirre joins the ranks of Emilio Campa. Once in the north, Pablo follows Federico Quintero's example and deserts with a detachment of soldiers and soldaderas who join Escalante in the state of Michoacán. The future general then passes through a probationary period in which he demonstrates that his loyalty does not belong to the government imposed by the United States. Escalante places four hundred ragged men under Pablo Aguirre's command. After all, despite his youth, Aguirre has learned more about military discipline during his brief time at the Academy than all the civilians who joined the cause for a mere matter of ideals or adventure.

They began to call him General, although he was no more than a cavalry major. When Escalante died, Aguirre placed himself under Francisco Serrano's orders. The general confirmed the rank Pablo had won while fighting in Michoacán and Zacatecas. Major Aguirre then fought in the campaigns against Huerta in 1914 and against the Convention in 1915. He was a hero of the Battle of Celaya, and from the moment he met Álvaro Obregón in person, he never took his eyes from him.

All these events, however, appear in any history of the period, and it is not appropriate to examine them further here.

Hugo may have received Pablo's military vocation with a mixture of sadness and jealousy. After all, he loved him and may have been sufficiently naïve to believe that a career in arms would finally end their amorous encounters.

For the moment, on that day in 1913 at the Ester Pool, Pablo cannot see his future clearly and thinks, like everyone else, that he will become an engraver, a painter in the best of circumstances. His most serious intention, however, is to remain pure and avoid the temptations of the flesh. Hugo, for his part, prefers not to think about it.

At the bathing establishment it is six-thirty in the evening. The crickets appear. Some swim near Hugo and Pablo, who cool themselves after the afternoon's heat by swinging their bare legs in the pool. Two enormous red patches have appeared on Aguirre's cheeks. They are lulled by the spasms of muscles relaxing after swimming.

Carlos and Marga are also tired. When the aguardiente is gone, Marga takes a banknote from the purse Carlos bought her with his own money and sends the two boys for more liquor.

At the shop, a Spanish woman with the unsettling name of the Sleepwalker accepts the banknote suspiciously. Pretending not to notice, Hugo and Pablo use the change to buy baked

sweets: one centavo for caramel and another for twisted sugar candies.

When they return to the pool, Carlos is distressed.

"How long you take, little brother! My hangover is nearly beginning."

Pablo and Hugo take good swallows from the bottle and withdraw to a stone bench to discuss private matters. Cold licks their legs.

The great moment of the afternoon is about to begin.

Between 1907 and 1908, Doña Ester transformed her establishment into a small entertainment center. Near seven, she has little tables and chairs arranged around a wooden stage. She sells cheap liquor, and the pianist, a certain Maestro Garrido, accompanies a ruddy matron who performs more or less risqué couplets.

This day, however, is special. Doña Ester has engaged two tango dancers. The tango is said to encourage excess, and in times of crisis that is precisely what the impresario needs from the respectable public.

When Ester gives the signal, listless applause is heard.

The dancers appear.

First they look at one another as if they hate each other for needing each other so much. They take hands and waists. The music begins; it is the story of two ungrateful lovers.

Their bodies intertwine over the sound of the bandoneon. They look into the distance. They twist, grow jealous, and touch. They seem about to kiss, but do not. Indeed, it is an eternal flirtation that does not ask to be consummated.

Stunned, Hugo stops moving his feet beneath the chair. His eyes abandon even Pablo's.

This dance produces a bittersweet sensation in his stomach. What they said is true. This is the dance of lust.

Hugo understands many things. Before these two, it is easy to realize, for example, that the game in the back room was part of something greater than himself.

"It feels warm," Pablo said.

That too was true.

Through this dance, Hugo becomes conscious of what has happened between them. He knows what Carlos feels for Margarita, what his mother felt when she first made love with the man with whom she fled: love present and concrete in another body, beyond all the romanticism of idiots.

Childhood is left behind in the silence following the bandoneon's final stroke. Hugo also understands the meaning of the crickets' sound and surprises himself by knowing that everything, absolutely everything, is infested with life, and that to be present there, feeling that river rising into him from the earth, is the only thing that matters.

Among the establishment's patrons, the tango produces more scandal than pleasure. It will take slightly less than ten years for it to establish itself as a fashion and symbol of an age. Ester has been mistaken again. Like her friend Margarita, she is always ahead of her time.

Hugo returns to himself. He discovers Pablo applauding openmouthed. Attending this celebration of bodies brings to mind a hot blue afternoon in Tlalpan.

They are now in the Estradas' garden, beneath a tree beside a small pond left by the rain. There, insects eat and are eaten beneath the water.

"Pablo."

"Mmm?"

"Would you have liked me to be a woman?"

Pablo, lying on the grass and letting the rain wet his body, turns his head to look at him directly.

He smiles.

"Of course I would!"