

This was in the days of compulsory military service, and at seventeen Antonio José had reached the age when he could expect to receive the call. He awaited his conscription notice with anxiety, but also eagerly, torn as he was at the thought of leaving a home that had seen more than its share of tragedy but which was also familiar and dear to him. When the letter arrived, three days after his birthday, he was disappointed to learn that he was being assigned to a camp far to the north, deep in the desert interior. His friends had been telling him stories of others who had performed their service in towns on the coast, where during their leave they consorted with the local girls and visited the beaches and casinos that attracted cruise ships carrying American tourists who were always on the lookout for ways to part with their money. In his mind, Antonio José had constructed a vision of himself in a starched white uniform, a beautiful girl on each arm, raking in stacks of chips at the roulette table. He understood that the reality was probably less glamorous than his fantasy, but like most boys his age he also was not fully aware of the kind of humiliating, boot-licking grunt work that basic training actually entails.

By age seventeen Antonio José felt cast adrift in a dangerous, hostile world with no idea why he was there. The deaths of eight siblings had burned eight holes in his young heart and left it permanently scarred. His only means of shielding himself from more pain was to keep all people at a distance and hold himself aloof from serious emotional attachments. To this end he cultivated a callous and defiant public persona, pretending to care about nothing and no one, even though he cared deeply about everything and everyone.

After the death of Eléna Serafína, he pulled

away from his mother and sister, and with menacing silences and accusing glances made them think he held them responsible. At home he quarrelled with María Concepción, bringing tears to her eyes by calling her a bitch and even *una buscona*—a whore—even though he had no basis for such allegations and did not himself believe she was anything other than a gentle young woman whose heart, shattered by grief, could never be mended. For her part, she told him he was behaving like a fool, causing them all to suffer needlessly when they had already suffered enough. To forget his sister's pain, he went into town with his friends on weekends and caused trouble, getting into fights, breaking windows, defacing public property. But try as he might, he could not lose sight of the immense divide that existed between his true caring self and the delinquent identity he was working hard to adopt. Unaided, he would never become genuinely heartless and convincingly project the image of a sullen, disrespectful teenager. He needed help. And the instrument he chose to help him in his quest was alcohol.

Antonio José had seen his father falling-down drunk more than once, and it was true that Francesco had a weakness for drink. He could easily have destroyed himself in this way. But he demonstrated true strength of character by moderating his intake and exhausting himself through hard work. He had escaped back to the mines shortly after Eléna Serafina's funeral, but when Claudia wrote to him about Antonio José he returned home determined to rein in the boy's wayward tendencies and set him on the right track.

It was customary for boys to be initiated into the ways of men at an early age, and Antonio José had enjoyed a glass of red wine with dinner when he was only fifteen. Claudia had permitted this and Antonio

José never drank more than a single glass and never exhibited a thirst for more. His habitual drunkenness at sixteen therefore came as a great surprise, and he was a surly, argumentative drunk. Francesco's presence in the house did nothing to inhibit his craving and, if anything, made it worse since he was unable to avoid the disappointment in his father's eyes. Prohibitions were put in place, but by Saturday night Antonio José had always managed to lay his hands on money that his older friends could use to buy a bottle of wine for him. However, despite the headache he was causing, Claudia did not want her last remaining son to enter the military without fanfare. They held a celebration for his birthday, with presents, cakes, and wine, and Antonio José was allowed to get staggeringly, roaringly intoxicated. At midnight Francesco, Claudia, and María Concepción carried him to bed and tried not to listen while Antonio José, out of his mind and raving, scoffed at them for the misery they endured, for their regrets, for their constant state of mourning. He said he was going to be free. He would change his name and make a life for himself somewhere else, away from the pernicious influence of the Cordobas of Envidado province. He remembered none of this in the morning, but on a subconscious level some vestige of this sentiment must have stuck. As the day neared for him to leave home, he grew pensive and less cantankerous. A few weeks after his conscription notice, a subsequent letter had arrived with a schedule and instructions he was to follow upon his arrival in the northern military outpost of Puño. He had gone into town to purchase the train ticket and told everyone he was leaving Wednesday morning. Over several days, while Claudia prepared pastries and other tidbits he could enjoy on the trip, he packed his belongings. However, on Tuesday morning while it

was still dark he got out of bed, took his filled duffel bag, some scraps of food, his shaving kit, and a few other important items, and quickly left the house. The train pulled out of the station at 5am, heading north. He said goodbye to nobody.

Antonio José's train did not go all the way to Puño. It made its final stop in Arica, where he was to board a military transport bus that would take him inland to his destination. Arica was a port town, located in a beautiful coastal region lush with tropical vegetation and blessed with a dry warm climate that attracted thousands of native and foreign holiday goers to its glistening beaches. The schedule told him that he had a few hours of leisure before he was to report to the local *Cuartel General*, where the bus would be waiting. He was tired after his trip, which had taken more than forty-eight hours, and had slept only fitfully. But the sight of Arica, brilliant in the morning sunlight, with its winding cobbled lanes, resort hotels, coconut trees, and brightly painted buildings inspired him with a sense of adventurous longing. He had never been anywhere like this, and was instantly filled with resentment that his family should have held him back, as if this had been done deliberately, in full knowledge of the pleasures of which he was being deprived. Moreover, the follow-up correspondence he had received had long since dispelled the fanciful notions that had earlier filled his head. He was therefore not convinced that the military was where he belonged and regarded the two years of service awaiting him with suspicion and fear.

He carried his duffel bag with him into a café and took a table by the window. Instantly, as if by magic, a little man with grey hair and an unruly moustache appeared and with a damp cloth wiped down the table. With an inviting smile he asked Antonio José what his pleasure would be. Antonio

José ordered a cup of coffee. However, he had already received two cheques from the state, one as an advance on his military salary and another intended to cover his transportation costs. He had cashed these and had therefore a substantial wad of pesetas stuffed into his jacket pocket. At this decisive moment his thoughts travelled upon two distinct paths through his mind: one which saw him spending the next two years in Puño, which was reputed to be a barren, desolate encampment where he would be living in uncomfortably close quarters in a tent with a mob of sweaty new recruits, performing menial labour from dawn to dusk, eating tasteless gruel, and pissing behind a cactus, and another which summoned him to live his life to the fullest, to experience all he could in the short time allotted to him. He called the man back to his table and ordered breakfast and, purely out of curiosity since he had never tasted it before, a whisky.

Of course, Antonio José did not understand that, genetically speaking, he had the makings of a true alcoholic and that the first drop of fiery amber liquid to hit bottom in his stomach would ignite a thirst that would not be quenched until he had consumed the entire bottle. His father had beaten back the demon only by sheer will power, but Antonio José was far from the sobering influence of his family. Having arrived in the cosmopolitan resort town of Arica feeling cheated by fate and in the mood to be more than a little reckless, with his pocket bulging with pesetas and two years of state sanctioned imprisonment on the horizon, he didn't stand a chance.

The little man in the café was no innocent bystander. The duffel bag and the wad of cash branded Antonio José as a new recruit, away from home for the first time, and the little man knew that

the military was willing to pick up the tab for whatever mayhem these inexperienced, vulnerable young men created. He also knew, though officially it was unacknowledged, that every season the military expected a small number of new recruits to go completely off the rails, to lose all their belongings, all of their money, their dignity, sometimes the clothes off their back, sometimes their freedom, and sometimes their lives. The little man had seen it happen on a number of unfortunate occasions. But who was he to go against fate? In fact, a widespread belief existed among the tavern owners, barkeepers, casino operators, pimps, drug dealers, bootleggers, and purveyors of pornography who did business in Arica, that this was the way in which the military weeded the weaklings and derelicts and perverts out of its ranks before they found their way in. Popular opinion held that these businessmen and -women were in fact performing a vital service for their country. By providing a source of temptation that only the most grossly substandard of its citizens would not be able to resist, they were saving their armed forces hundreds of thousands of pesetas in tribunal and court marshal costs that would otherwise be spent after the fact when these inferior young men showed their true colours. The little man in the café therefore believed that, though technically it was against the law to serve hard liquor to a teenager, and especially unethical to do it before eleven o'clock in the morning, he was bound by a sense of duty and national pride to fill the order. This was how Antonio José Cordoba found himself lifting a glass of the finest American whisky to his lips before he had been off the train for twenty minutes.

The first sip filled him with a warm feeling of kinship for all humanity and a supreme sense of self-confidence, and he quickly drained the glass. He

drank his coffee as well, but suddenly the food he had ordered seemed repulsive, and without tasting a single bite of breakfast, he paid his bill and left the café in search of an open bar or *taberna*, where he could do some serious drinking.

Lined up side by side along the road that faced the beach was a tempting array of establishments suitable to the boy's purpose. He selected one and went inside. Here, in a smoky interior made intimate by subdued lighting, the middle-aged woman behind the bar, who felt upon her broad shoulders the same weighty responsibility for her country's welfare as the little man at the café, filled glass after glass according to the instructions of her young patron. When Antonio José could no longer hold himself upright on his stool, she assisted him into a back room and laid him down on a cot, where he instantly began to snore. She also rifled his pockets and helped herself to the money he owed her, along with a sizable tip. She forgot about the duffel bag, which sat abandoned on the floor of the *taberna* for a short while before another patron, who had been keeping an eye on these proceedings, walked off with it. Antonio José awoke an hour or so later aware of only one thing: he was going to die if he did not immediately have a drink. He did not know where he was, but in the muddle that his brain had become, this did not register as a concern. When the same woman refused to serve him—because she now recognized him for what he was: someone who would happily drink beyond his means if given the opportunity—he raised a stink and was forcibly ejected.

Outside, he wandered along the boardwalk beneath the afternoon sun feeling himself hard done by and craving that deep affection for all humanity and the supreme sense of self-confidence that had warmed him earlier. Without these the world was

intolerable and all the people in it seemed deceitful and small-minded. Finally, in a side street close to the port, nestled between a boating supply store and a muffler repair shop, he found a drinking establishment that would serve him. He sat down and pulled the much diminished wad of cash out of his pocket and laid it on the counter.

Events become sketchy at this point, but the one thing that is certain is that Antonio José did not survive the night. He was found by the morning's first light face down in the shallows near a wharf where amateur anglers went to collect bait and cast their reels. The back of his head bore the imprint of a mortal blow, but the autopsy, carried out under the watchful eye of a military coroner, showed that he had in fact drowned before he could die from the effects of his wound. The body was shipped home, with the costs graciously borne by the state, and delivered to his family, who had spent several frantic days trying to establish his whereabouts after his surreptitious early morning departure only the week before.

