



www.andotherstories.org

Tres ataúdes blancos (Three White Coffins) by Antonio Ungar is one of the novels featured in the winter 2011-12 Spanish-language reading group run by And Other Stories.

from *Three White Coffins*
By Antonio Ungar
Translated by Katharine Silver

BEFORE THE BEGINNING

One thing led to another.

At seven o'clock in the morning I was about to practice Maestro Kepis's third (sublime) sonata when a string broke on my double bass, emitting the same sound living cats emit when you step on their tails, a curious phenomenon, because the chord was actually made from the guts of a dead cat.

One hour later, at eight o'clock, my father refused to buy bread for breakfast in spite of having done so quite punctually and with an upright bearing every morning of every day, each and every day contained within the past forty years. Papa didn't say anything. He just refused, just like that, without giving any explanations.

At twelve o'clock, to finish the morning off, a young man wearing an orange T-shirt walked up to a table where Pedro Akira was eating cannelloni in tomato sauce, whispered four well-modulated words in his ear (Take this, you bastard), and shot three bullets into his head, which fell with wide-open eyes onto the plate of cannelloni. As opposed to the first two events, this last one, fortunately, did not happen in my house.

One thing led to another, and that was just the beginning. I'm talking about the head resting in the plate of cannelloni. Heavy and still and deaf, and attached to Pedro Akira's compact body by a strong and manly neck. Oblivious to all the consequences his stillness began to unleash outside the Italian restaurant, in other heads and along other streets, less secondary and more primary. Consequences transformed into actions that now, seen from here, from this necessary distance, seem like terrified ants running away from each other, ants fleeing from their own shadows. But that came later, five hours after the first memorable event of the day, already briefly described, the breaking of the string on my double bass, which doesn't seem worth mentioning but really is, and the reason shall soon be seen by those who listen.

The string broken, me sitting on the player's stool as if in the middle of a planet devoid of people, at seven fifteen in the morning, I had to assume that that day would be different. I walked over to the window, looked at the sky (blue) for a moment, sighed as only I can sigh, then decided to slink as stealthily as possible down the hallway, managing to step only on the quietest boards of the floorboards then tiptoe down the stairs and reach the magnificent crystal cabinet, an inheritance from mama, where the family's entire supply of alcohol was stashed. My own supply of alcohol, I should say, for papa had been abstemious since 1974 and there being no family other than he and I in that squat, dark house in the La Esmeralda neighborhood, the site of the action, which has not yet been activated.

Given how late it was I assumed I would have to cancel my exquisite class, I like that word, I always have—exquisite—my exquisite class in Baroque architecture in the also exquisite General Studies Department at the not very exquisite National University of the Republic of Miranda. What I mean is, I wouldn't go to my eight o'clock class. The class's absence in my day and with that absence the absence of the slides that would have shown the (monumental) pictures of the Piazza Navonna in Rome and Bernini's (imposing) fountains, all that (very solid) stone of the Baroque, all that weight of architecture and of culture on architecture and of air within architecture, all that, once imagined,

suddenly collapsed into a black hole then disappeared as if it had never existed, turning into a scratching in my dry throat, a tickle powerful enough to move mountains.

The time had come to make my first cocktail of the day. I stirred together the ice cubes and the vodka and the sugar and the mint leaves without making any noise because I believed that there were still (how naïve of me) forty minutes before papa would get up and cover his erect and withered human form with his best plaid robe, put on his blue slippers, and emerge as dapper as ever in his battle suit, ready to go buy bread for breakfast. I trod carefully through the second floor hallway carrying my second glass of vodka with mint (the first having already been ingested as I fondly contemplated the plants in the garden), I trod carefully with the glass lodged in the large pocket of my pajamas without spilling a single drop and with my hand frozen by the ice but my body quite still, when through the corner of my right eye my pupil saw that papa just wasn't himself.

I turned my round and lucid head and looked at him with my whole right eye and with my left one as well, with both my eyes and my frozen hand still in my pocket. Papa just wasn't himself. Not the self he had always been at that same time of day. Of any day. He wasn't standing in front of the oval mirror, inheritance from mama, straightening the collar of his pajamas, he wasn't smoothing out the sides of his robe as if it were the robe of some movie Mafioso, he wasn't adjusting his sleeves nor clearing his throat like a withered up fighting cock nor like a gentleman wearing a robe. Not at all. He was still lying in bed, papa was. Not moving. White and emaciated, like a marble statue. He hadn't even turned his head to look at me. At me. His son. His very own son. I was on the verge of spilling the precious liquid in a not very seemly place. I left the doorway, took the glass out of my pocket as best I could without spilling even one drop and without disturbing the mint leaves, and carried it to my room. I hid it in my closet, among my shoes. Dismayed by the sight of the marble statue but in full control of all my faculties, that is, steady as she goes, I returned to the room of misfortune. There I attempted, to no immediate avail, to get papa out of bed without the use of physical force—even though we are talking about a marble statue—but rather using the sheer force of will.

I cajoled him with persuasive words. As if he were a child. After I had spouted three or four verses, papa stared at me with his gray eyes and cut short with one fell swoop my finest line, telling me that I could talk as much as I damn well wanted, that I could even do a headstand, that I could do a striptease if I had nothing better to do, but that he was staying put. And that I should get out of his sight. Now. Disappear.

Bewilderment and desolation and sorrow are words that come to mind (and leave again without fulfilling their mission). After a few seconds of paralysis I walked over to the foot of the bed, where the statue's feet were resting. So he could see me better. Once there I placed my powerful hands on my waist and looked at him as only I know how to look at him. To remind him that he was the one who brought me into this world, that my 220 pounds were real ,and that I could also, given the circumstances, cry like a puppy dog.

Get lost, he said. I'm meditating.

That slice of morning that transpired between my moment with petrified papa and the one that would transform my destiny, for the good of my family and of society as a whole, was in no wise noteworthy. Irritating curiosity was all, sucking my guts dry and gnawing away at everything. Curiosity to know what papa was thinking about and to understand why he had thrown me out of his room and to also understand what he'd gotten into his head (unbearable curiosity like a ball of fire suspended in the middle of the room: an unexpected apparition with a pulsating sound that threatened to set the house on fire, even the neighborhood, and the city if left unsatisfied).

That's the way the morning was. The first two mint cocktails in my head: What could he be thinking, lying there like that in bed, poor papa? What could be more important than me (his own son)? Fifth cocktail: Might our entire existence as a family be condemned to total annihilation? And then, while contemplating the blender in the kitchen: Are we stranded in a desert where nothing can rescue us (papa on one sand dune and me on another, very far away, without being able to hear each other ever again, until the end of time)? From the sixth to the eighth cocktail the entire house—empty, cold, damp—crowded into my head. With all its miniscule sounds and all its bolts and screws. The mountains of the city looking at me and I with some difficulty looking back at them through the walls. Mama's things trying to speak without managing to do so. The certainty that papa, still lying in bed, was being consumed in flames in his bedroom, impervious to the fire because he was a white marble statue. And finally, why not, the exquisite sensation of having turned into a deaf Beethoven.

Already a deaf Beethoven, already having downed eleven cocktails, I went out into the garden and looked at the savannah potatoes papa had planted in a circle around the *papayuelo* tree. I imagined the roots of the potatoes sinking into the earth, down, slithering under my feet and trying to rise up and wrap themselves around my ankles. I closed my eyes then opened them to the sky, where clouds were rushing from left to right with admirable restraint. Inspired by this sight, I decided that it would be best for me to devote my abundant free time to exercise. Exercise is health. Devotion then, without delay. Leg flexions.

Arms swinging up and down by my sides. Little hops. Breathe correctly: in the nose and out the mouth. Thus I proceeded.

Once this strenuous and commendable session was over, having reached the fourth or fifth minute without too much difficulty, I went to wash up. As I climbed the stairs I knew I would never again be a deaf Beethoven nor would I understand the molecular structure of mama's squat, dark house in La Esmeralda neighborhood, because once again I was listening to my own footsteps. When the water from the sink touched my red cheeks I thought that this was how some characters in really bad movies got their thoughts clear. And it worked—really in reality—and it was as if instead of drinking eleven vodka and mint cocktails I had only drunk eight or nine. Overjoyed by my discovery and proud of my strenuous physical activity, my round head now very clean and adorned with a discreet smile not devoid of mordant intelligence, I returned to the kitchen. From the copper cup imprinted with the coat of arms of the Republic of Miranda I stole a few coins to buy bread. Over the red pajamas that highlighted my elegant silhouette, I wrapped myself in the robe of destiny, papa's extra robe, which was hanging damp on the clothesline in the washroom.

That's how I left the house. Proud, my head aloft, determined as never before to confront, all by myself, the worst dangers of my favorite city.

Now that I've finished the first three sections of this *Prologue with Papa*, the story is finally approaching the breaking point or the moment of tension or the vanishing point. The great event, I mean. That which remains still unexplained. As well as all the consequences, which will begin to rain down upon the characters (introduced and still unknown), one by one, inescapable, like a shower of bullets after a street celebration.

Let's recap. All who are listening already know that very early in the morning I damaged a musical instrument—difficult to play and with a compound name—and that I bore with stoic patience the passing of time, suspecting the worst when I saw my very own father not wanting to go buy bread and instead insisting on pretending to be an enigmatic marble statue. Let's return to the place of the action. Let's, as if this were an expensive movie, zoom in from the height of a helicopter flying over the great city and over the La Esmeralda neighborhood and there in the neighborhood let's watch the debonair figure of the hero, the narrator-protagonist, who has just left his house, alone and wearing a house robe, to confront the street that swarms with children and bicycles.

Let's follow the narrator-hero to the bread store, placing his broad back in the foreground interspersed with close-ups of his mouth firmly set and his forehead shimmering in the sun. Stirred up, we can once again express ourselves in the past, a verb tense that, without taking any heroism away from the hero, is much easier to use than the present. Let's then say that the streets were littered with food packaging and animal waste. Light bags of one or two colors swirled solo around the sidewalks. No storm clouds were gathering in the sky. Across the lawn of the park adjacent to the sidewalk, upright and astute, not blinking exceedingly much, marched the hero and only authorized narrator.

Back to being myself, I thought that the neighborhood was so dirty it would soon no longer be called La Esmeralda. Then I didn't think anything else. In front of two houses that tried to be identical to papa's without managing it (they weren't squat enough), two neighbors were washing their miniscule cars wearing sports outfits they believed were very much in style and perhaps would have been in a Greco-Roman wrestling match held at the end of the seventies. They didn't seem to see me, these so passé neighbors, or perhaps they were

intimidated by the way the sides of my robe fluttered open, exposing my corpulence, because they pretended they didn't notice anything, each one focused on his own respective hose. I lifted my chin, pushed back my shoulders, and after holding this lofty posture for a few moments I finally reached the always welcoming bread store.

Mr. Jaramillo, standing behind the counter, was staring at me with his mouth hanging open, perhaps erroneously believing that papa had turned into me overnight. He seemed just about to ask after the original when the television set, hanging in one corner just below the ceiling, emitted at full volume a shrill music that seemed military but also disco and also from a science fiction movie, a music for a Special News Bulletin. Mr Jaramillo picked the remote control up off the shelf and turned up the volume. *Breaking News*. The most famous television announcer in Miranda spoke those words with his charming voice that sounded as if he ate horse food with bullets for breakfast every morning. *Breaking News*, he repeated. Seeing the tense expression on Mr. Jaramillo's face as he stared at the television, I had no choice but to indefinitely delay the purpose of my visit (bread) and turn on my heels, not without some difficulty given the gooey texture of the floor. I then realized that sitting at two of the four little square tables in the place were I don't know how many individuals leaning on their elbows in front of their warm beers. I did what they were doing: I stared at the television without moving a muscle. It sprinkled us with a bit more of that unbearable music, along with some computer-generated images, which looked like they came out of a robot's head, until finally the news came. The breaking news.

The news already known to all who listen patiently. Pedro Akira had been shot, much to his sorrow, while eating cannelloni moistened with tomato sauce in the Forza Garibaldi Italian Restaurant (founded in 1967). The third important event of the day. The spark that was to light the wick of all the consequences. The Honorable President of the Senate of the Republic, Pedro Akira. Shot down in mid mouthful. The charismatic leader of all the opposition parties. The recently announced presidential candidate. The champion of the hungry and the poor's only hope. All this and much more. The television showed only the facade of Forza Garibaldi, which had a little pitched roof made of plastic-mud tiles and an

iron door painted black. Under the large second-story windows, hanging from the phony colonial roof, was a metal sign with white, red, and green lettering that read *Ristorante Forza Garibaldi, at your service since 1967*. I felt a tightening in my throat. I regretted being so far away from home and that Mr. Jaramillo didn't know how to make cocktails.

The camera showed all that, then zoomed out (Introduction to Film, General Studies Department, N. U. of the Republic of Miranda) that is, it used a lens to gain distance from the scene and then after performing a couple of acrobatic feats it landed like a fly on the face of a young lady journalist who was ready, with a microphone to her mouth and a sword and pistol by her side. She had long straight hair and wore a well-ironed white blouse, a pastel-colored scarf around her neck, and a gray skirt hugging her hips. But it wasn't the journalist who made my heart pound. No, it wasn't her. Oh, such a commotion. Oh, such a tragedy. Oh, such a misfortune in successive black (and cold) waves of considerable size. Pedro Akira. Struggling between life and death in a hospital with a Russian name, according to the lady journalist. Pedro Akira. The only defender of the weakest members of our republic. Pedro Akira. His name—AKIRA—bouncing like a vegetarian bat against the walls of my skull. Oh, Pedro Akira, voice of the dispossessed and the only one able to stand up to that (to him): the omnipotent, the eternal, the almost unnameable: President of the Republic of Miranda (Of the Republic: of Miranda (Don Tomás del Pito)).

Take note. Take note, he who listens patiently. President del Pito: creator of the heavens and the earth. And all the rest of it, too. Plenipotentiary Dignitary. Supreme leader whose name should be spoken under one's breath or inside one's head, or shouldn't be spoken at all. Write this down, dear reader, in the margins of this book, if you have no other choice. Take note before your faithful ventriloquist slips back into the turbulent river of events, which will lead him who knows where. Write it down: Plenipotentiary Dignitary, Lord of the Heavens and the Earth. Write it down in International Morse Code, if possible, to avoid unpleasant consequences. President Don Tomás del Pito. Who is and will be the patron and main character, there's no choice, he, that one, the unnameable, of the enormous marathon of a narrative that has already commenced.

The above extract appears here by kind permission of the copyright holders who retain all rights.

© Antonio Ungar

© Editorial Anagrama

Translation © Katharine Silver