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Sombras de reis barbudos by José J. Veiga is one of the novels featured in the autumn 2018 Portuguese reading group, run by And Other Stories

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Sombras de reis barbudos (Shadows of Bearded Kings)

José J. Veiga

Excerpt (chapters 1-4) translated by Rahul Bery

1. The Arrival

Ok, Mum. I'll do what you say. I'll write down the story of all the things that went on here after Uncle Baltazar arrived.

I know the only reason you keep asking is to make me stay indoors, because you think it's dangerous for me to keep on roaming around outside, even though the inspectors are no longer inspecting as much and as keenly as they used to. Maybe it really will be a good way to pass the time, and anyway I'm tired of wandering the same old places, of the mournful sight of empty houses, doors and windows crashing about in the wind, wild shrubs growing on patios that were once so well maintained, lizards crawling fearlessly over furniture, and opossums making nests in the empty fireplaces, getting their own back for the days when nowhere, not even the backyards, was safe for them.

With the events still vivid in my memory, I thought writing down our story would be easy. But I just sat there, pen and notebook in hand, not knowing how to start. Mum says she won't read my writing because she isn't much of a reader and also because she already knows the whole story better than I do. This is obviously another trick, meant to put me at ease. She's so sly, Mum is, she thinks of everything. I must take care not to leave my notebook lying around, especially if I decide to talk about what happened that time at Uncle Baltazar's house.

Would I be writing anything at all if Uncle Baltazar hadn't turned up here, his mind set on establishing the company? I'm not saying I think it was his fault; it was a good idea, and everyone was so excited about it. Anyway, the story I'm going to tell starts with his arrival. Who would have imagined in that time of joy and celebration that such a beautiful dream would end up degenerating

into the disastrous Taitara Improvements Company.....? Poor Uncle Baltazar, how he'd suffer if he was still alive today. I think that's one of the reasons Mum didn't cry so much when the news finally came.

I was eleven when Uncle Baltazar first showed up. He'd married again, but came alone. Everyone had heard of him because he was meant to be a very rich man. Remembering that time, my father told me that after just a few days here Uncle Baltazar had thought about quitting the Company and going back home. So I'll ask the question again: if he had gone back, might he still be with us? And if he hadn't founded the company, would we have endured all that we did? But asking these questions now is as pointless as asking if your neighbour's calf would still be alive if it hadn't died. I'm here to talk about what happened, not what didn't.

Uncle Baltazar. A name, a reputation, dozens of photographs — that was how I knew him. It seems he found it absolutely necessary to have someone take his portrait every month, maybe even every week. He would often send Mum photographs of himself, taken either in a studio by a portrait photographer or out in the open by a friend.

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There's one I remember particularly well, which shows him at the wheel of a shiny sports car local experts said was Italian, and very expensive: Uncle Baltazar has his left arm resting on the car door, his hair parted in the middle, his open shirt collar folded over his check jacket like a movie star, cigarette and holder in his mouth, and on his face the smile of a very wealthy man. That photograph, with the inscription to Mum on it, was a great hit among our friends, many of whom as well as looking at it themselves wanted to show it to other people. Diligent but vain too, Mum did lend it out; but if someone was late to return it, it would be my job to go and get it back, for a document of such importance could not spend too much time in profane hands.

If I'm going to be completely honest, I can't fail to mention the disappointment I felt when I first saw Uncle Baltazar outside our front door, getting out of his car. At first I thought it was someone else, a friend or perhaps an employee of his. His hair was much thinner and it wasn't parted down the middle, I think because it was no longer fashionable to have it like that. And his face wasn't as boyish as the one in the photographs. But what disappointed me most, frightened me even, was the missing arm. Where was the left arm that had been resting on the car door in that famous photograph? As I saw him lower himself out of the car, aided by the driver, with his empty jacket sleeve tucked into his pocket, the magical image I'd had of my Uncle, the champion sportsman, immediately went up in smoke. I'd seen people with missing legs, missing arms, missing hands, and once I even saw a man with no nose kneeling by my side in church during Holy

Week: but none of those people were my uncle. I felt so disappointed that I went and hid in the cellar, and didn't come out even for dinner. Thinking back to that day, it's difficult to understand why I behaved like that; it's as if I was accusing Uncle Baltazar of having cut off his own arm off in order to humiliate me in front of my friends.

But no one worried much about my absence. I only heard Mum calling me once, and I became more and more curious to know why they were so oblivious as to my whereabouts. If no one cared about the fact that I was missing, then something very important must have been going on up there while I hid in the dark making bats out of scraps of paper. I made up my mind to go up before it became too difficult.

First I went to the kitchen to eat something, and considered how I was going to make my entrance into the living room. I was rummaging around the cooking pots when Mum came in to get more coffee, taking me by surprise.

—Really, Lu— she said, sounding like she wasn't all that concerned.—Your uncle arrives and you just disappear. Could the rabble out on the streets really not have waited?

Just as well she thought that's what I'd been doing. I already knew it had been foolish to run away from Uncle Baltazar just because he was missing an arm. You don't stop being human just because you lose an arm or a leg, do you? And what about that lame detective I saw in that film, beating up a whole bunch of consummate criminals? What a shame I hadn't remembered that film earlier.

Mum was looking at me, and I could tell she knew the truth. But instead of scolding me, she smoothed my hair and said:

—Just eat something and come and talk to him. He has a surprise for you, and he's keen to know if you like it. I'll say you had a meeting at school.

I ate quickly, not even touching the pudding. I was still wiping my mouth as I entered the room.

—At last, the scholar has arrived— Uncle Baltazar said, resting his cheroot on the ashtray.—Come here so I can get a good look at you. He's got his grandfather's face, hasn't he, don't you think Vi? I've never seen such a strong resemblance. How's school going? Good grades? Study hard, but don't forget to play too. Children who only study and never play end up weedy, with those mean-looking faces geniuses always have, and we don't want that in our family. Am I right, Horácio?

The question was directed at my father, who was smoking quietly at one corner of the table. Before he had a chance to respond, Uncle Baltazar continued, taking a small, thin package from his pocket.

—I brought this for you. See if you like it.

Mum gestured at me to open the package, while my father continued to smoke, making an clear effort to display his indifference. (I was still unaware of certain issues between my father and Uncle Baltazar.) I tore off the paper to find a small black box with a latch on top. When I opened the box, I couldn't believe what I saw. Inside it was a gold watch with a gold strap; a real watch, perched upon a velvet cradle.

We tried out the watch on my wrist, and Uncle Baltazar taught me how to adjust the size of the strap, which was loose even on the smallest fitting. Mum told me to wait two or three months, but I wouldn't hear of it; I said it was fine the way it was and went off, fearful that the watch would be taken away from me. Even my father, who had seemed so distant, laughed and said he doubted I'd have the patience to wait two or three months.

Looking at the watch on my wrist, feeling the weight of it as I lowered my arm, I felt that something wasn't right: such a valuable object couldn't really be mine, and this suspicious feeling lasted a good while. But from the moment Uncle Baltazar placed the watch on my wrist I completely forgot he was a cripple. He rested the watch on the table and went about shortening the strap with a single hand, demonstrating just how easy he found this task.

Mum was disappointed to find out that Uncle Baltazar had rented some rooms in the Grande Hotel Síria e Líbano and that he wasn't going to be staying in our house. But he came almost every day for lunch or dinner, and on Sundays he would take me out for a ride in his motorcar, just me by myself because Mum went once and was sick, and my father was never able to go; when he wasn't tired he had a headache or had to pay a visit to someone, and I don't think he ever got into that car.

One day Uncle Baltazar went to fetch Aunt Dulce, and when he came back for the second time there was an even greater celebration, because this time his stay lasted many years.

2. A running man

It's curious how sometimes things can go on right in front of people without them realising, and then by the time they do notice them they're already old and fast. Then before long they change again, in the same gentle way. It didn't cross my mind that anyone could not like Uncle Baltazar. Nothing would have shocked me more than if someone had come along and said such a thing. Lo and behold, someone did say it, and it happened right here in this house.

At first I thought my father was a great friend of Uncle Baltazar's, and I didn't notice how every time Mum sang her brother's praises my father would keep his mouth shut, or make himself scarce. This bomb exploded in my face one day when Mum was talking about Uncle Baltazar while my dad silently drank his coffee. Suddenly my father knocked the cup over and said:

—Enough, Vi. I already know he's the Eighth Wonder of the World.

As he said this he got up and left the room.

—I don't know why your father was so mean about Baltazar— Mum said, sounding dejected. Then, regretting what she'd said, she corrected herself:

— Ah, how foolish of me. He must be feeling nervous for some other reason.

I began to pay more attention, and soon realised that my father was not simply in a bad mood; rather, he had had a barely disguised tantrum. More alert now, I began noticing other things as well: Mum was quite cold towards Aunt Dulce, while Uncle Baltazar pretended not to notice my father's ill will towards him, nor my mother's coldness towards Aunt Dulce.

I'd already grown accustomed to my parents' antipathies, and had drawn up some rules intended to avoid stoking them, when just like that things changed from water into wine. How it happened I'm not quite sure. All I know is there was a fight in the registry office: Uncle Baltazar had an argument with the registrar and was only prevented from hitting him by the people who ran in to separate them. After that fight Uncle Baltazar and my father were the best of friends, like birds of a feather. They even went fishing together, my father preparing the hooks.

Mum was very pleased about their friendship, and now she could praise Uncle Baltazar unreservedly, with my father not only concurring, but going on to praise him further. One day he even said, in front of me, that Uncle Baltazar was a man of great courage and vision, forgetting about how he used to turn his nose up every time Mum mentioned his name. I later found out that the fight in the registry office had been in defence of my father. However, this change in the situation did not benefit Aunt Dulce; she continued to be discreetly shut out by Mum.

My father was over the moon when Uncle Baltazar began discussing his plans for the Company. Anyone who saw him explaining the matter to people, countering any criticisms that

came his way, might have thought it was actually my father's idea. On many occasions I watched Uncle Baltazar himself throwing cold water over my father's enthusiasm, only to then be strongly refuted.

From the conversations in the house I learnt that the main difficulty was capital, something that didn't interest my father: faith and passion were enough for him. Uncle Baltazar agreed and said that without those two ingredients they wouldn't get beyond the first stage; but he questioned how they were going to keep the firm going until it was well-established, how they would pay the employees, suppliers and other expenditures that couldn't be foreseen. The money he had would not suffice, except maybe for a little factory that would probably just languish slowly, generate more and more debt daily, and ultimately be of benefit to no one.

—We'll find a solution—my father would repeat. —We just need to get started. Everything else will be resolved with faith and passion.

—They only solution would be capital or credit, which is the same thing — I heard Uncle Baltazar say one day.— When I have enough capital, or guaranteed credit, we'll get started. It's too risky otherwise.

But Uncle Baltazar didn't just sit there waiting for the capital to fall from the sky. He wrote and received many letters, while on the streets people were already calling him The Company Man. He also took to travelling a great deal, sometimes near, sometimes far, always carrying with him a file stuffed full of papers.

My father said he was wasting time travelling and talking to people who didn't have a clue about the matter, instead of commencing immediately with building the factory.

When Uncle Baltazar was away travelling Mum would send me to keep Aunt Dulce company, which I liked because they lived in a huge house, and I slept in a room with a rug, mirror, curtains and clothes that still smelled of the shops they'd come from, and all night Aunt Dulce would tell me stories of Uncle Baltazar and the journeys they'd been on together, all substantiated with photographs taken from a sizeable box made of varnished wood.

Then the procession of people coming from outside began, a group of men extremely vain in their speech and dress. They were put up by Uncle Baltazar in the Hotel Síría e Líbano, and treated us like we were Indians or country bumpkins (which left my father in a constant state of irritation and outrage), complaining about the rooms, the food, the dust, as if they were all kings accustomed to the finest there is to offer. And when they were with Uncle Baltazar they cast doubt on the papers he showed them, asked him questions he couldn't answer, and went off without having resolved a thing. Uncle Baltazar was left feeling disheartened for a few days; then he began to accept that the men had been right: the plans were not mature enough, and so he puffed up his crest and started

everything again from scratch. My father said that it was silly of Uncle Baltazar to waste the little capital they had on those smart alecks who'd only come here to eat for free and then leave, picking their teeth and laughing to themselves.

Things were reaching a stage where even I had begun to feel that the plans for this Company would never become a reality, when one day Dr Marcondes, a kind and courteous old chap, arrived in a sparkling new blue Chevrolet with his son; this went down very well, as up until then people round here had only ever seen black cars. While Dr Marcondes conversed with Uncle Baltazar about the matter of the Company his son would take me for rides in the car. The son was just as affable as his father, and despite my apprehension about outsiders after the last lot, I took to this boy straight away. His name was Felipe, and he was obsessed with taking photographs of everything; he even found old houses and crumbling walls interesting. Felipe taught me to use the machine so that I could take a portrait of him leaning against an old wall, on the corners of bigger houses, at the stone entrance to a church, leaning over a bridge and looking down, swimming in the river or fishing. And when we went driving in the countryside Felipe wanted to know the names of the trees, the flowers, the birds, every little creature we encountered. Even the tiniest, most insignificant beetles were of interest to him.

Felipe spoke in a funny way. For him, good things were exceptional, bad things abominable, ugly things heinous, beautiful things refined; he used all the words we usually find in books by important writers. Very quickly all the kids around here were talking like him, while the old folks found it funny and said better we learnt these words than other ones.

While Dr. Marcondes was here Uncle Baltazar had almost no free time to visit us, and when he did appear he'd be running, only stopping to say good day or good afternoon, not even staying for coffee, as he couldn't leave Dr Marcondes waiting. My father took advantage of these brief visits to advise him to keep his wits about him, and to remind him that the nicer these men from outside seemed, the more dangerous they were, as if he knew all about business, and Uncle Baltazar knew nothing.

When eventually Dr. Marcondes decided he needed to go back and consult his partners, Uncle Baltazar organised a great send-off, the likes of which none of us had ever seen; he hired every car in the city, even spruced-up lorries, for a motorcade. When we reached the crossroads, and it was time to say goodbye, Felipe removed the camera from his shoulder and hung it from mine. I just stood there, not wanting to accept it, but he said he didn't need it because he was going to get a camera for making films with, a most exceptional, refined thing, and he'd already chosen the model in a catalogue. Ah Felipe, my exceptional friend.

The business with the factory entered another barren period. Uncle Baltazar was completely exhausted and went to have a holiday with Aunt Dulce on a friend's ranch in the Mata da Canastra, and it looked like he wasn't coming back. My father said Uncle Baltazar had been duped again, and that it was high time he stopped being so green.

Could it be that Dr Marcondes and his son, who had seemed so friendly, were nothing more than two unscrupulous chancers? But then what about the camera given to me without my asking for it? And Dr Marcondes's request to Uncle Baltazar — "I'd like you to find me a place nearby, with a good amount of *jabuticabeira* trees so that I can have two or three months rest each year. I can't put up with big city life for much longer"—? Was he just pretending? I felt so disappointed I even avoided using the camera so as not to be reminded of Felipe or his father.

And then all of a sudden everything began falling into place. First Uncle Baltazar turned up, plump and rosy-faced, telling stories of hunting and bathing in waterfalls, and saying to everyone that he felt ten years younger. Then some men sent by Dr Marcondes began to arrive and suddenly everyone was running here and there, all over the place, with meetings happening every day, and Uncle Baltazar and my father too busy even to eat; telegrams were coming and going, lorries arriving fully loaded, everyone was in a state of heightened activity.

Years later, by my reckoning, and only twenty one months later according to Uncle Baltazar's records, the factory was ready. Even to this day, that inauguration was the most important moment of our lives. I never saw so much joy in one place, and I don't think I ever again will if I stay here. We have a great photo of the inauguration taken by a photographer from Dr Marcondes's entourage, everyone standing on a platform constructed on the patio. Mum and Aunt Dulce are in the front row, both of them wearing hats and gloves, Aunt Dulce is joining arms with Dr Marcondes and Uncle Baltazar, and Mum is arm in arm with Uncle Baltazar's empty sleeve and me. My father is standing at the very end, on the right, because he'd got there late and hadn't wanted to mess up the arrangement; and the photographer had hardly even slammed the plate shut before he ran off again to continue getting the supplies needed for the party. My father spent the whole time running around back then; if he had known what he was running towards, he might have taken a little more care.

3. The departure

People talk so much about happiness, and they go to such great lengths to be happy, but very few of them are interested in the happiness of others. And they should be, because one person's happiness benefits everyone, if for no other reason than because it's a wonderful sight to behold. For two or three years Uncle Baltazar was completely happy, and to see him like that was more than ample compensation for all the hard work. The factory was doing better than planned, everyone was happy and its founder was widely venerated. Talking a stroll around the city with Uncle Baltazar was like being in the company of a god, or a saint, people might just as well have knelt before us as we went by.

They were now living in a mansion in the centre, which they'd acquired at an auction, and which came ready equipped with expensive furniture and trinkets from all over, with packages frequently arriving containing more new things ordered by Aunt Dulce. My father said that he had to dust himself off before entering so as not to spoil the rugs, silks and velvets. He was exaggerating though, because I could come and go as I pleased. It's true though that when they threw parties, mainly for people from far away who had been invited to come and see the factory, I didn't really feel comfortable moving around those rooms filled with expensive things, and I'd sneak off as soon as I could. Anyway we hardly ever went to the parties, because my father was always tired and Mum didn't have the right clothes. Mum said you needed a lot of money to keep up with Aunt Dulce.

With so many celebrations, so many problems to fix and so many trips on Company business, Uncle Baltazar no longer had any time to visit us, and even my father, who worked with him, would go days without seeing him. Occasionally he'd send us a message asking us to go and visit, but Mum would drag her heels, saying that these days they were never alone and that she felt less and less comfortable talking with strangers. One day she said that even if she never went to the mansion it wouldn't affect how she felt about Uncle Baltazar: her feelings hadn't changed during all those years when he lived far away, had they? But she did ask God for one thing: that Uncle Baltazar would never regret exchanging his old friendships for new ones.

I had no complaints, though. I knew what time Uncle Baltazar arrived at the factory and what time he left, and if I wanted to see him all I had to do was weave my way along the road until the car came past, and without doubt he'd tell the driver to stop and I'd get in. If there were strangers travelling with him he'd introduce me: 'this is my nephew Lucas, he's going to be an engineer and run the firm when I retire'. Then he'd ask about my father, my mother, tell me to extend an invitation to them, and when we got to where he was going he'd tell the driver to take me back; at first I liked this because it made my schoolmates jealous, but after a while I'd always wriggle out of it because the jealousy was getting too much.

It was better when I met Uncle Baltazar travelling by foot; he'd walk along with his hand on my shoulder the whole time, asking about my studies, if I needed anything, books, clothes, toys. Even if I said no, he'd say a boy always needs clothes, and he'd take me into a shop and buy me everything, shirts, shoes, socks, all in the latest fashions, and he wouldn't let me take the packages home, instead he'd ask the salesman to get them sent to my house. I'd never been so well dressed in my life, it's just a shame he didn't do the same thing for Mum; I think he didn't want to offend my father.

The truce between my father and Uncle Baltazar was never fully sealed. To this day I don't know what happened between them at the start to make them become so suspicious of each other. On Uncle Baltazar's part it was not so obvious, for being a rich man, he could rise above some things and pretend he didn't notice others. My father, always embroiled in trivial problems, was more distrusting, more ready to take the bull by the horns. Sometimes I even suspected that he was using his job at the Company as a weapon against Uncle Baltazar. Even at the height of his enthusiasm for the Company, there were occasions when he couldn't keep quiet and would make one of his vicious criticisms, which would undoubtedly end up reaching the ears of Uncle Baltazar. I know now that this was something he did to prove that he was independent, and not simply a yes man for the Director-cum-President; though I must admit, it was quite a strange way of showing it.

It wasn't long before my father began openly mocking Baltazar, his cars, his parties, the cases of foreign wine he received; on one occasion he even attempted to make fun of his physical defect, at which point Mum, without losing her calm, had to have a serious talk with him. And she spoke so convincingly that my father blushed with embarrassment and never again repeated the joke he'd uttered. At all other times she simply listened and said nothing, and advised me never to defend Uncle Baltazar so as not to stir my father's anger.

One day my father was criticising how much Uncle Baltazar spent on expensive cheroots. He said that for the price of one box my mother could buy herself a wool cardigan to wear during the winter. Mum wasn't happy, and they argued, and from the argument Mum and I discovered something that left us both quite perturbed. Mum had said that Uncle Baltazar could spend as much as he wanted on cheroots because he was a good man, because he helped lots of people and because he was going to put me through engineering school without expecting anything back.

—I'm glad you brought that up actually—my father said.—I think it's better if Lu abandons this idea of being engineer.

Mum, who was fixing a button onto some of my trousers, stopped what she was doing in alarm and asked:

—Abandon it? Why now?

—That's what rich people study.

—But Baltazar's going to help. He's already promised!

—Yes, but that doesn't mean he'll be able to fulfil the promise. No one knows what tomorrow may bring.

—Come, what nonsense—. Mum sounded relieved —He's still a boy, and he's in very good health, thanks be to God.

—Maybe. But that's not what I'm thinking about.

—Then what? You think he'll change his mind?

—What if other people change their minds?

I didn't understand, and I could see that neither did Mum. How could other people changing their minds, whoever they were, have an effect on our lives? Sensing our incredulity, my father explained:

—What I'm saying is, other people might change their minds about your brother.

—And what if they do?

—It could all go downhill.

—In what way?

—Influential people might find that he isn't as competent as all that. You should know, Vi, that it's not all roses over at the Company. Your brother Baltazar isn't the only one in charge. Don't be shocked if things suddenly change.

This was proof if proof were needed that my father's resentment towards Uncle Baltazar was already affecting his judgment. No one had even considered that anyone else could give orders above, or against, Uncle Baltazar's wishes. I looked at Mum, who moved her attention back to the trousers, which was a sign that she had also realised how absurd all of this was. Then she spoke calmly:

—The shock won't kill us, Horácio. He'll call the shots until he no longer wishes to.

—Is that so? You keep on thinking that then. But you don't know what I know. I'm there every day, I see and hear many things. We'll do well to brace ourselves. Lu needs to learn a trade, or get a job.

—What do you know about Baltazar that's so bad — Mum asked.

My father didn't answer, but still she insisted:

—Horácio, what do you know?

Mum was in a pitiable state over the days that followed. She knew my father and knew that she'd get nothing more out of him, and so she decided that it was her responsibility to do something to protect Uncle Baltazar. But what could she do when she didn't know what was being plotted? And even if she did, what could a simple housewife do against these men who wanted to be more powerful than Uncle Baltazar?

Suddenly, she became good friends with Aunt Dulce, marking out one day of every week on which to visit her, usually in the afternoons, when the likelihood of encountering strangers in the house was minimal. The first few times I had to go with her because Aunt Dulce was very fond of me and my being there made it easier for them to spend time together. Mum's aim was not to gossip, but to warn, and Aunt Dulce put her at ease straight away, saying that Uncle Baltazar was used to facing down intrigues in the Company, and no one was going to catch him off guard; he

knew about everything that went on there, and while his enemies were curdling milk he was already eating the cheese.

I don't know what else they spoke about during these visits because around this time things began to change at school: a new teacher came along with the idea of forming a theatre group, and I was chosen for a part in her first production. I was really taken by it, and thought about nothing else but theatre, even rehearsing alone in the house. I no longer had any time for Uncle Baltazar and his problems with the Company. Mum and Aunt Dulce were good friends now, if anything happened we'd find out straight away. And also, if Uncle Baltazar knew everything, like Aunt Dulce said he did, he'd know everything my father knew. So why should I worry for no reason, show more prudence than the president himself?

Every afternoon we went to rehearse at the teacher's house, where she had a big living room she'd set up for rehearsals by drawing stage markings on the floor, so that to enter or exit the stage you just had to walk over a chalk crescent, and if you were on one side of the outline you had to pretend you couldn't hear the people on the other side; for example, one time I was offstage, waiting for my turn to enter, and I could hear all sorts of insults being directed towards me, but when I came onstage I was received with nothing but praise and adulation, and I really had to steady myself to avoid laughing or messing up my part. I'm not sure if this was what the teacher was thinking of when she told us that theatre teaches us how to live.

The rehearsals were going ahead of schedule, everyone knew their lines, and the teacher had already designed the clothes we were going to wear on stage. But when I found out that Uncle Baltazar had ordered the Company to help with the carpentry costs and other costs, and that there would be a dress rehearsal the following week for him and Aunt Dulce, my enthusiasm for theatre began to dampen. I was afraid of stammering, or saying my lines badly, and never recovering from this disaster.

One day some men paid the teacher a visit during a rehearsal. In the doorway someone whispered something to her. Then she came back in, looking very concerned, and dismissed us. At that moment I didn't find anything amiss in how excessively polite she was being towards me, even as we walked down the corridor, and, with her arm on my shoulder, she praised my acting skills.

As soon as I stepped outside I could sense something in the air. There were loads of people running in the direction of the Company, stopping anyone who was coming from that direction. Those I knew looked at me oddly, as if they were surprised to see me there at that time of day. I asked a few people what was happening, no one knew for certain, one spoke of a catastrophe, another of a crime, and yet another of a fight. I thought of Uncle Baltazar and ran home.

Mum had no idea what was going on. When she saw me come in she was surprised that the rehearsal had ended so early, and I said nothing so as not to scare her. I shuffled around a bit, forced down a bit of cake and a glass of milk she had prepared for me and said, as nonchalantly as I could:

—I think I'm going to pop over to Uncle Baltazar's house.

—Then can you take back this dress of your aunt's I've been mending. It's finished and wrapped. But please be careful with the package on the way so it doesn't get crumpled. And tell her sorry if she doesn't like it.

I found Aunt Dulce walking up and down in the living room. She barely acknowledged my kiss and told me to leave the package on a coffee table. There was an ashtray full of cigarette butts on it. Suddenly Aunt Dulce stopped next to me and asked about Mum. As I was opening my mouth to reply, she ran to the window to look at something. I stayed where I was in the living room, feeling completely useless, like a beanpole in the garden, just staring at Aunt Dulce. I wanted to help, to do something, but I didn't know how or what.

Aunt Dulce lit a cigarette, came back to the table, moved the dress, stubbed out the cigarette she'd only just started, looked at me as if seeing me for the first time and asked me if I was growing up to be a young man. I knew then that the situation was critical and that my being there wouldn't help at all. I kissed Aunt Dulce again and left, disappointed at my inability to help.

As I was descending the mansion's stone staircase, Uncle Baltazar's car came through the gates and began climbing the ramp that encircled the front lawn. To avoid being seen I hid behind a stone urn and watched. The car stopped before the staircase, and the driver got out and opened the door. Uncle Baltazar sat motionless inside the car, looking straight ahead at the headrest in front. Aunt Dulce came running down the staircase, without noticing me, and went to help him out of the car.

That same night, as Mum and I waited for my father to arrive with news of what had happened at the Company—we waited in vain, for he only appeared the following morning—, Aunt Dulce took Uncle Baltazar, who was not doing well at all, off for treatment. They left no farewell note, no kind of message whatsoever.

Some time later we discovered that the mansion, the furniture, the fine wines, the cars they had left, and everything else, were being sold by power of attorney. We had no news of my uncle and aunt for a long time.

4. Walls walls walls

With Uncle Baltazar gone, the Company ceased to exist for us. My father continued to work there, but both Mum and I hoped it wouldn't be for much longer. Many of the people linked to Uncle Baltazar were dismissed in the days immediately following the coup, and there was no reason to think my father would be spared. Surely the delay was owing to the fact that they were rifling through his files to see if they might yield an excuse for a harsher punishment, for mere dismissal would surely not suffice for the brother-in-law of the former head. My father's days were numbered, and only he couldn't see it.

Anyway, it didn't make much difference whether one stayed or went: all signs indicated that the factory was in crisis and that it wouldn't survive much longer. Payments were suspended, inspectors and technicians came and went in a hurry, like doctors visiting a seriously ill patient. From what little we knew on the outside, Uncle Baltazar's departure had seriously upset the Company's credit situation and so far the new men in charge were not managing to remedy the situation. Some even said they were remorseful and that they were thinking about asking Uncle Baltazar to come back, but I understood this to be a fantasy dreamed up by his friends, a form of wish fulfilment.

Uncle Baltazar's mansion was bought up by a Spanish family, and was going to be converted into a hotel. It was a shock for me to see the outside walls painted in that horrible reddish tint, the grass all damaged by the coming and going of workers and the building materials; it broke

my heart to witness such mistreatment. The second or third time I walked by it I resisted this feeling of sadness and thought to myself, it's only a house, why feel sad about it when the Company itself is falling apart?

One day I said that the Company was falling apart in the house and for the first time I heard my father's opinion on the matter. He looked at me, frightened, and asked:

—The Company, falling apart? Where did you hear that?

—Lots of people are saying it — I replied.

—Is that so. They know nothing. Let them be. That way the surprise will be greater.

—So it's not then?

He smiled and said:

—Look here, Lu: pigs will fly before the Company falls apart. Now stop going around repeating this nonsense.

I wasn't sure if he really knew or if he simply wanted it to be true, just like the people who said Uncle Baltazar was going to come back.

All of a sudden, the walls, those walls. Just like that, they sprung up overnight, straight, curved, damaged, descending, ascending, dividing streets straight down the middle, separating friends, blocking views, casting shadows, muffling all the sound. To this day we still don't know if they were built on the spot or brought in ready made from somewhere else and installed there. At the beginning we wracked our brains trying to figure out how to get from one street to the next, and we thought we'd never get used to it; today we can get around with our eyes closed, as if the walls didn't exist at all.

With so many walls to stare at when we were sitting still, and to navigate when we had to get somewhere, everyone's lives were getting harder and harder, but at home we really didn't have much to complain about. Not only was my father not dismissed, he was actually promoted to the role of inspector, of what I'm not sure, and he looked as happy as he had been in the first days of the Company. Now he went around the place dressed in a blue uniform which Mum sweated to keep in an impeccable state, if he saw a crease or a mark on it my father wouldn't wear it until it was fixed, and he even got hold of a magnifying glass to examine the uniform. My main memory of Mum at that time is one of a shabby ghost standing by the ironing board, scrubbing, stretching, starching and sighing.

Little by little my father began to gain a level of respect which not even Uncle Baltazar had reached at his height, in the glory days immediately following the inauguration, when people would step over each other to be greeted by him on the street. But there was one difference: with my father, it wasn't the spontaneous, unaffected respect of those who simply wish to compliment

someone for something they've done already; it was the sycophantic flattery of those scared of being hindered in some way; as an inspector my father could either help or hinder, for the inspectors operated with *carte blanche* and could not be contested.

The worst thing was, the excessive respect people paid to my father had begun to affect me. My schoolmates were already trying to avoid disagreeing with me, everything I said or proposed was agreed with the moment I finished speaking, it was like I had somehow become everyone's boss. Well, not everyone's. Two or three, the ones I liked the most, didn't always applaud my actions; but to compensate for this they became more and more aloof around me, as if they could see the warning signs of a dangerous and repugnant disease.

The blame lay squarely with that uniform. I knew other Company inspectors, from time to time a group of them would meet here to arrange services with my father and exchange information, but I never saw any of them wearing a uniform. If my father was their boss, as it often seemed he was, why did only he go around in a uniform? Shouldn't it be the other way round, the boss has the right to dress however he likes? So one day when he came home in a good mood, full of satisfaction with life, I plucked up my courage and asked him.

—It's not compulsory, Lu. I invented the uniform myself. It commands more respect. —He gave a twirl to show it off.—A fine thing, isn't it? You should see how the way the *hoi polloi* act around me. They almost wet themselves. One day we'll take a walk together so you can see.

I thought about Uncle Baltazar, who even with his unrefined country airs and his physical impairment, had been freely respected by all. When he invited me to take a walk I considered it a gift I'd never have dreamt of refusing.

To avoid being taken on one of these walks with my father, my daily routine became marked by a constant vigilance. If I came home and saw the blue cap on the coathanger, I'd get all my books and jotters out on the table and pretend to be deeply embroiled in my homework; or I'd invent different ailments, difficulty breathing, something wrong with my foot, whatever sprang to mind. I'd never been the type to get ill just like that, and Mum quickly cottoned on, and came to my aid. I couldn't even just relax and play with my friends any longer, I always had to have one eye on the game and the other watching out so that I could hide as soon as I saw the blue shock of that uniform emerge from round the corner. If the life of an inspector was a hard one, as my father sometimes said, mine was no bed of roses either.

In terms of comfort and wellbeing, our life was certainly improving. First my father bought an electric iron so that mum could iron the uniform without risking burning it with coal sparks; then came the new furniture for the living room, the wardrobe, table and chair set over there, in the Mexican style, all of that in just one year; and he talked about buying me a new bike for Christmas

—as long as I promised not to go associate with the rabble that went around scrawling bad things about the company on the walls.

The food we ate also got better. Besides the many expensive delicacies my father began buying —things I'd only previously seen in Uncle Baltazar's house—we received lots of gifts from strangers, big tins of biscuits, metres and metres of sausage, dozens of cheeses, jars and jars of different jams, suckling pigs, chickens, every kind of sweet, so many things that sometimes Mum barely knew where to put them, as even the space under the beds was all taken.

One day, while Mum was searching without success for somewhere to keep two more tins of the finest biscuits, my father stuck out his belly, lifted up his head and said:

—Better to lack space than to lack food.

—You're right —said Mum. —But it's all full up. Maybe they could stop sending us so many things.

My father stretched out again and said:

—It's even fuller than your brother Baltazar's larder.— Noticing that Mum was not pleased, he quickly corrected himself:

—How is he anyway? Have you received any news?

—No— replied Mum brusquely, and she retired to her room.

My father looked at me mischievously, I pretended I hadn't understood, and he went out onto the street, whistling.

Mum spent the rest of the day in a deep sadness, lost in contemplation, sighing and looking into the distance. I tried to distract her, I told her about things that had happened in school, about my part in the play which we didn't end up performing, the bicycle I was close to getting; she tried to show interest but couldn't manage it, her thoughts were elsewhere.

In the evening she asked me to accompany her to the church. When we got there she kneeled in one corner and remained still praying, her eyes fixed on the image up high. Seeing that gentle figure contemplating the image and praying, and maybe crying too, I don't know, I felt such a deep sense of pity and tenderness, and I swore never to hurt her in any way, whatever happened. I thought about the bad things I'd done, the stubbornness I'd displayed and I felt the profound pain of remorse. Kneeling myself now, I moved slowly towards her and until I was able to lean over and hug her.

She looked at me in surprise; she understood. She smiled and hugged me back, and we stayed like that for I don't know how long.

We snapped out of it when her rosary fell to the floor, the linked beads making a clattering noise that resounded for some time. She wiped her face and, suddenly energised, said:

—Get moving, silly! How can I get up with you leaning on me like that?

I don't know what kind of inspections my father was involved in. He left in the morning with a little notebook in his pocket, and at night he copied out the annotations onto forms which he then tore off and put together in a bundle in the drawer. Once a week the completed forms, bound together with a rubber band, were put in a package and taken to the Company.

I spent a lot of time thinking of ways to get my hands on the notebook or the forms, but my father never took his eye off the ball, in fact it seems he even sensed my curiosity. One day when Mum went down to the yard to take care of the plants, and looked like she might take a while, I sensed an opportunity. I grabbed a knife and attempted to force the drawer open, the way I saw my father once do it in Uncle Baltazar's house. I was almost getting somewhere when, to my surprise, Mum appeared.

—Shame on you, Lu. Let go of that knife right now. I don't want you acting like a burglar.

With no excuses to give, I confessed.

—I had my suspicions. But please, never do this again. Whatever is kept there is none of your business, or mine.

Still dejected, I asked her if she really had no desire to know what the forms were about.

—None at all. Sometimes knowing is much worse than not knowing.

The way she said it made it seem like she did know, and my curiosity increased.

Around this time groups of weeping women with children in their arms began coming to our house, where they'd form a crowd outside the front door, waiting for my father to enter or leave. The mucky, bleary-eyed children cried the whole time, were picked up, cried some more. When he did appear the women would run up and surround him, imploring him to do something, I don't know what, they made such a racket it was difficult to make anything out; he'd violently force his way through, pushing and striking them with his hands, sometimes accidentally hitting one of the children, shouting at them to clear out of his way, not to touch his uniform. I asked my father what they wanted, and why they were weeping so much. He shrugged and replied:

—They want me to do the impossible. Why didn't they tell their husbands to fall in line? Now they'll have to deal with it.

Realising that they weren't getting anywhere with my father the women changed their tactics and started clinging on to Mum, showing her their sickly children, with their swollen legs and blemished hands, and talking about their husbands who were being mistreated somewhere or other, and how they wanted my father to fix it. Afflicted, distressed, and almost crying herself, yet unable to do anything, Mum would run into the house and return loaded with supplies which to hand out, and while some begrudgingly accepted, others angrily refused, saying that they had come to seek justice, not to beg.

This went on until a wall was built right in front of the house, I think at my father's request. While in one way the wall gave us peace —it goes right by our door, and you can only find your way here using a map —in another way it made our lives most difficult indeed. To confuse the undesirables, the wall took many twists and turns, and that stood for us too. A journey which we had been able to do in a few minutes ended up taking an hour or more after the wall was built. At the beginning even my father needed a map to find his way, and poor Mum immediately stopped leaving the house, not even going out to church anymore; she'd pray in her room instead, kneeling by the bedside.

With so many walls everywhere, wearing you out and dampening your spirits, it was hard to know what was going on in the city, what people were thinking and saying. In the old days I'd come back from school full of news for Mum, but now I came and left in complete darkness, and the few people I met along the way knew nothing about anything either, nor would they feel like talking. All you could see, no matter where you went, were walls, unless you looked up; but what was there to see up in the sky, other than clouds and vultures?

The above extract was translated by Rahul Bery

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