

## Sample translation of *Sprinters* by Claudia Larraguibel

### Translation by Tim Gutteridge

I

Tobias looked after the chickens. Klaus cleaned the machinery. Sophia slit the pigs' throats. And Rainer specialized in driving people mad.

It's a habit of hers, has been for years. She goes for her evening walk, enters the cemetery and visits the grave with no name. It was a kind of game they had when they were teenagers and she's kept it going. The grave is covered with cement and is marked by a large granite headstone, decorated with a gold cross and rounded at the top, identical to all the others except that it bears no date and no name. But everyone knows the grave belongs to Hartmut, the dead boy, the first of the settlers to leave like that, suddenly, after a day out hunting. Until his death, the only people who had been buried were the elderly. The young ones were trained to survive, to work without stopping, never to get ill. They were well fed, they breathed clean air, all of them were in good health. And that was why, when they went past the cemetery, they always contrived to brush against the gravestone (but it wasn't something they ever arranged: just a glance, a subtle gesture, imperceptible to the Uncles, because the young people weren't allowed to talk among themselves). So brushing against the gravestone was a kind of homage to little Hartmut. And a spell so that the same thing would not happen to them.

The cemetery lies next to the wood, a privileged spot with views of the mountains and the river. Lutgarda particularly likes to visit at this time of year, at this time of day, when the heat has subsided and the air and the ground and the stones are beginning to cool. The end of the summer coats the leaves with fine dust which will be washed away when the rain comes. She wants to be buried there, ideally in the third line of graves – which have the worst view but are the most sheltered – protected by three walnut trees that indicate the path which disappears into the undergrowth.

Hartmut Münch died in the wood, she tells me suddenly in clumsy Spanish, as we stand next to the grave. And although I've already heard two or three versions of this story, I invite her to talk. It was at the end of the eighties. More than twenty years ago now, she adds with a sigh. They said it was an accident, that he cracked his skull when he fell off the back of a truck. That's what Doctor Gisela told everyone. She was the one who treated him when he was brought to the colony hospital. Onkel Wohri drove him, unconscious, in the lorry from which he'd fallen and, without saying a word, left him at the entrance to the hospital. There was a huge wound on his head, from here to here (Lutgarda traces a line on her own head, all the way across the right side of her skull). His pulse and his blood pressure were very low, and there was nothing they could do. At the hospital, they tried to save him but he died half an hour after arriving. He was eight years old.

Some time later, the police decided to investigate Hartmut's death. They came and asked questions, time and time again: what had happened, how it had happened. Doctor Gisela had to go to the police station in town and give a statement before the magistrate. (Despite the fact that her position entitled her to leave the colony, she never normally did so.) The authorities had not been notified of the accident and now they wanted to know why, but nobody was able to provide an explanation. And no autopsy had been done on the body. It had just been buried immediately, in that nameless grave.

Everyone who was assumed to know something had to give a statement. Nurse Jetta. The Uncles. Even the boy's parents.

Not Onkel Wohri, though. Because Onkel Wohri had died in a plane crash a few weeks after Hartmut's death.

Lutgarda walks down the slope and swats at the mosquitoes, as if warding off her memories. At her feet, in a wide plain surrounded by fields and enclosed by two rivers, lies Colonia Dignidad, a substantial settlement of long two-storey houses with tiled roofs. There's also a pond, some barrack houses, the barn, pigsties, cowsheds, the brick factory, the dairy. And, beyond that, the old landing strip, the school and the hospital building, now abandoned.

At the end of February the pastures are yellow and the harvest has been gathered in, the fields made ready for autumn. From this vantage point, Lutgarda admires her village, her home. She has lived there almost her entire life. She's only left a handful of times, and only twice of her own accord.

She walks a few steps ahead of me. She looks very like her sister Agnes: she's a taller thinner version, without glasses but with the same square forehead, the same eyes – blue, always half-shut – the nose with its bulgy tip, and a large masculine chin. I do a quick calculation. Agnes told me her sister was five years younger than her. So that means Lutgarda and I must be almost the same age, I realize to my surprise. But she looks, how can I put it... more worn out. It's not just a question of clothes. I'm wearing jeans, trainers, a t-shirt, more or less the same clothes I wore when I was twenty even though I'm now in my forties. She's wearing a blouse buttoned all the way up to the throat, and a pair of work boots that clash with her flowery skirt and her apron. Just what she would have worn when she was twenty, I guess. All the women here dress the same, however old they are. The locks of hair that poke out from beneath her white headscarf are grey. My hair is uniformly chestnut: I dye it religiously every two months, I use moisturizers and I always put on sunscreen. Her face has deep creases around the eyes; faint lines trace an incipient chessboard on her cheeks; she is very tanned – not the even bronze of a summer holiday but the reddish-brown burn of constant exposure to sun and wind and cold.

I tell myself I've done my bit. I've delivered her sister's cello. I've lugged the instrument almost three hundred miles in my small car. I've handed it over. I even agreed to accompany her on this walk. But now I want to leave as soon as I can. It's the second time I've been to the colony and there's nothing left for me to do here. I brought the cello – the object of a dispute that had separated the sisters for years – and also a letter. With it, Agnes has resumed the secret correspondence she had kept up with her sister since escaping from the colony, a correspondence that ended with the cello incident. I don't know exactly what the letter says but, Agnes more or less told me, it's an offer of reconciliation. Agnes doesn't want to remain estranged from Lutgarda, her little sister, her favourite. Even less so now that she has decided to forgive everything that happened. To forget. To make her peace with the past.

After escaping from the colony, Agnes and her husband wandered all over Chile looking for a place, a house, the possibility of a life. When I met them they were scraping by on the Island of Chiloé, but they had already tried to make a go of it in two or three places and in each their experience had been disastrous. Then I met them again in Santiago, overwhelmed and unhappy, dependent on the overstretched hospitality of Fernández, the lawyer who represented them. I saw them a lot when they were there but after that we lost touch. Until a couple of weeks ago. By pure chance. Outside the supermarket where I do my weekly shop every Saturday. I saw her. Agnes was waiting at the bus stop. She recognized me immediately even though it was a long time since we'd last met. I recognized her, too: she's unmistakable. She doesn't look like anyone else. Her hair is grey and sparse, tied up primly with a child's ribbon; she has huge pink seventies-style glasses. Her unfashionable clothes, the sandals

with socks. The expression on her face when's out in the street, a mixture of fear and surprise. Motivated by sheer politeness, I asked her how she was, afraid that she would once again make me feel that I owed her something, that she and her husband needed something that I could give her but didn't want to. She hugged me and I felt she was genuinely glad to see me. Perhaps because I was confused by that hug, I told her I'd been invited to go to Parral to teach a course. Isn't it ironic, I added, I'm going back. She moved away slightly and looked me over from head to toe.

Then you can take the cello to my sister, she blurted out, quite bluntly and leaving no room for dispute, with that innocence and that certainty that used to make me feel so uncomfortable back when I spent time with them.

To the colony? To your sister who lives in the colony?

Yes, she answered, happily. And that was when she told me, in fits and starts, that she and her husband had finally found a place, a good place, a peaceful community with good people who were willing to help them. They were moving to a farm in Pirque. And she needed to get rid of the cello. And also to make her peace with Lutgarda.

I racked my memory. I tried to visualize the dozens of pages where I had transcribed the informal interviews I had conducted with Agnes over several months. The incident with the cello was there somewhere.

When Agnes and her husband found out that the elders had decided to open the colony, the couple dared – for the first and only time – to go back to the place where they had lived and suffered for most of their lives, to ask for their belongings. Agnes waited at the gate and Lukas, her husband, went in to collect the few items they had left there. Lutgarda didn't see them. She was up the mountain, gathering pine kernels. Lukas grabbed some clothes, a few wood carvings and the cello. When Lutgarda got back that evening and they told her that Lukas had taken the instrument, she swore for hours and sent Agnes a stinging letter, claiming that her husband had stolen an instrument that belonged to the sisters. Agnes, in an effort to make Lutgarda see reason, replied that the cello was hers, that she was the one who knew how to play it, not Lutgarda. She missed playing it, Agnes added, in a conciliatory tone. But Lutgarda never replied. Since then, the sisters had not communicated.

The sun has set and night is falling slowly: blue, purple, black. Behind us, over the *cordillera*, lightning illuminates the valley. A summer storm, Lutgarda explains. She laughs like a child and, eyes closed, she raises her face to the sky, yearning for the generous rain that will wash the dust away.

When we say goodbye at the entrance to the colony, it is already completely dark. The gatehouse is surrounded by a stone wall, on which hangs a bronze plaque informing visitors that this is the entrance to Villa Baviera.

"I preferred Colonia Dignidad, the old name," Lutgarda lets slip as we walk past the plaque.

"Well, I guess they had to change it," I reply, although she already knows that. The fantasy name was a ruse the elders came up with when they were being pursued for tax evasion in the early nineties. But Lutgarda waves a hand, brushing aside my explanation, and asks about my film. For a few seconds I don't understand the question, don't understand what she's talking about.

"Agnes told me who you are, that you met because you're making a film about us. That you're friends. That's why she asked you to bring me the cello. She'd never have given it to someone she didn't trust."

“The film never got made,” I say.

It was more than three years since the screenplay I’d written about the colony had been archived in the office of one of the many production companies that had been involved with the project.

“Why?” she asks, incredulously. “After so much work, all those people who spoke to you...”

“There was no money,” I explain.

“Out there, money’s always a problem,” she says, shaking her head. And then she thinks for a while. “Nobody’s interested in us any more, are they? I think they’ve forgotten us. It’s better like that. Much better.”

We lapse into silence again.

“Are you going to be in town for long?” she asks, after a while.

“Just until Saturday. I’m doing a workshop at the library. When I’m finished I’ll go back to Santiago.”

“A workshop?”

“On screenwriting. For local people.”

I don’t know if Lutgarda understands. I don’t think she’s seen many films, maybe none. I don’t know if she knows what a screenplay is.

“The screenplay is like the backbone of a film,” I begin, while already doubting if this is true, but she interrupts me cheerfully:

“Like what you did with our story...”

More or less. Yes, that’s it.

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(Sequence One: THE YOUNG GERMAN)

### **1. Exterior. Fields - Evening**

Long shot. Orange and pink sunset over a wide cultivated valley. From afar we see a group of women working in the fields.

Medium shot. The women are blonde and are dressed almost identically: simple garments of rustic cloth, white aprons, headscarves, their hair in braids. The atmosphere, the rhythm of the women moving among the crops, the light that falls on the valley, the birdsong, the noise of a nearby stream... everything helps to create a bucolic, 19th-century scene.

### **2. Exterior. Woods - Evening**

We hear agitated breathing. A youth is hiding in the undergrowth. He's sweating, and he's panting with fear. At the beginning, we just see his shoulders and the back of his neck. Avoiding the women, he reaches the riverbank.

The youth - TOBIAS - is blond, tall, thin. His weather-beaten face makes it hard to guess his age. He could be sixteen or in his mid-twenties.

We hear barking and footsteps. The farm dogs, large well-trained mastiffs, become aware of his presence and bark even more loudly. The youth hurls himself into the water and swims desperately to reach the other bank. Finally he manages to cross the river. We can still hear the dogs barking furiously in the distance. The youth runs, occasionally hesitating before deciding which way to go.

Some details begin to clash with the 19th-century atmosphere of the previous scene: we see barbed wire and electric fences. The youth squeezes through a hole in the fence and escapes across country.

Cut to the stable of a small house that appears to be abandoned. Tobias finds a horse. He unties it. Strokes its muzzle. Hesitates. He doesn't know how to ride. The horse doesn't have a saddle. Tobias finally makes up his mind and hoists himself up to sit bareback. It's obvious he doesn't know how to ride but he clings tightly to the horse's mane and the horse gallops off. The barking gradually fades away.

### **3. Exterior. Tarmac road - Night**

In the middle of the countryside, dark and silent, the headlamps of fast-moving pickup trucks emerge. Off screen, we hear orders being given in German over crackly walkie-talkies, the speakers interrupting each other.

### **4. Exterior. Dirt road - Night**

An empty dirt road, covered in mist. Tobias emerges from the undergrowth. His clothes are soaking and he's leading the horse by

the reins. He stops at the side of the road, choosing which direction to take. Suddenly, a police car appears, illuminating Tobias and the horse with its headlamps. We are left with the image of the youth's startled face.

#### **5. Interior. Police station - Night**

Tobias, sitting and wrapped in a blanket, is being questioned by a young policeman. "Stealing horses is very serious," the policeman says. Tobias assures him, in broken Spanish, that he was just borrowing it, he was going to return it. The policeman asks where he was going; Tobias doesn't know what to say.

The police captain comes in and asks for his papers. Tobias looks blank; he doesn't have any papers. "In addition to stealing the horse, I've been told you're a minor and you've run away from home," the captain says. Tobias shakes his head. "I'm twenty," he mutters.

Tobias orders him to wait until the owner of the horse arrives. Tobias doesn't seem to care. The policeman invites him into a room with a table, chairs, a pair of camp beds and a TV.

The young German stands very upright, staring at the screen in fascination. The news is on. A mudslide that's destroyed a campsite. An artificial heart implant. The break-up of *The Ramones* after their final concert in Los Angeles. It's 1996.

Tobias is completely captivated by the TV, unable to hide his amazement and his excitement. For a moment it is as if he has some kind of mental impairment. The policeman gradually falls asleep. On the table is a tabloid newspaper. Tobias picks it up and looks at it. "Donkey with five legs", "Triple murder", "Farmer finds transparent chicken egg"... Tobias hides it under his shirt.

#### **6. Interior. Police station - Dawn**

One of the pickups we saw in scene 3 pulls up outside the police station. Three blond men get out. The police captain comes out to meet them. He gives a warm greeting to one of them, GERHARD, a well-built German, around forty-five years old, with a very serious expression. We can't hear what they are saying because we are observing the scene from inside the police station, through the window.

#### **7. Exterior. Road / Colony - Day**

*OPENING CREDITS START TO ROLL*

### ***SETTLERS***

We leave the police station behind. The pickup is driving along a dirt road. We pass through idyllic countryside: with snow-capped mountains in the background, endless lines of poplars, green fields, crops. Spring is beginning to appear everywhere.

View from inside vehicle; to the left is a small Bavarian-style chapel, a wood and a large enclosed field with a herd of deer. To the right, newly-planted fields and a village school decorated with murals of animals painted by the children. But there are no other vehicles or people on the road. Everything seems to be deserted.

We come to a hut guarding a metal gate. A very severe-looking old woman opens the gate. She's dressed in the same way as the women in the opening scenes: long skirt, apron, white socks with sandals, white headscarf. The woman closes the gate, grumbling.

The pickup goes over a roundabout and past several buildings that are under construction. The settlement is austere but well looked after, with solid buildings in a timeless undefined style.

Pan shot: at one side there is a small petrol station and several sheds that look like workshops. At the other, there are three low buildings that could be houses. In the centre are lots of flowers, a neat lawn and a large pond with swans.

Several people are visible, all blond. And all dressed in the same strange old-fashioned manner. An old woman who looks like a Second World War nurse - in a light blue uniform with a white cap and apron - cycles past. A man in a checked shirt walks by with an Alsatian. An old man in a wheelchair dozes under the trees. Men and women of different ages are working. Nobody says hello. Nobody talks. They scarcely even look at the pickup, they're all concentrating on their work.

The pickup keeps going and stops a few yards further on, in front of a white two-storey building. It's the colony hospital. Gerhard gets Tobias out of the vehicle and takes him into the building.

*END OF OPENING CREDITS*

ARTICLE THREE:

*The object of the corporation "Sociedad Benefactora y Educacional Dignidad" shall be to provide assistance to children and young people in need, through education which is both morally and physically healthy, providing them with moral, academic, technical and agricultural instruction to enable them to lead dignified lives. To achieve these aims the Corporation intends (...) to provide these young people with a genuinely homely environment, to teach them respect for human dignity, and to educate and prepare them to be useful members of society.*

26 June 1961

*Articles of Association of Colonia Dignidad*

The hotel room smells of damp and, to make things worse, the floor is almost completely covered by a dirty grey rug. Three days, it's just three days, I tell myself after putting on my pyjamas and slipping beneath the flowery bedspread. I earn some of my income by giving workshops in cinema screenwriting (although most of my clients are careful to add "and television"). A friend, a real go-getter, one of those people who know how to make the most of every opportunity, particularly government grants and funds, added me to her team of suppliers and every now and then she hires me. At the moment, the government is allocating more money to projects outside Santiago, in the provinces, and my friend wanted to know if I'd be prepared to work down south. I nodded, it seemed fine, I needed the money and I didn't mind travelling. My first assignment was in Parral, a small town near Colonia Dignidad, where I was to give one of my workshops – probably to the usual collection of bored students, pensioners and housewives with free time and creative urges. I came here for the first time four years ago and stayed in a modest guesthouse which, however, was far more cheerful than this place. I don't remember exactly where it was, I think it was on the edge of town or maybe in a village slightly closer to the colony (Catillo, perhaps?). A family guesthouse that rented rooms to tourists. What tourists came here? At the time I imagined (and today I've confirmed) that the only visitors were a few fanatical devotees of Ricardo Neftalí Reyes, better known as Pablo Neruda, who was born nearby. On some wall, on some street, there must be a plaque, but I've never bothered to look for it.

I visited the colony in early 2006, shortly after returning to Chile. I say *return* but the word is not quite right. I had been born in Chile but I couldn't really say I was returning. In reality, I had never lived in the country. My parents had gone into exile in Venezuela when I was four years old and we didn't go back while Pinochet was in power. Until the early nineties, when they decided to return after the plebiscite that restored democracy. However, my siblings and I didn't accompany them. None of us had any link to our parents' homeland. None of us had any desire to go and live in a country at the end of the world. My younger brother stayed in Venezuela. My elder brother left for Barcelona. And I went to university in Madrid, where I lived for almost fifteen years.

But, after all those intense happy years, I was exhausted by the rhythm of my adopted city: the work, the parties, the noise, the loneliness and, in 2005, an uncertain future. As a result, when a producer I knew suggested I convert a story I'd been working on into a screenplay, I jumped at the idea. It was a way of escaping from Madrid to investigate a disturbing situation that was little known outside Chile. Colonia Dignidad, that sect of Germans who had lived on an enormous estate of more than 16,000 hectares in the shadow of the Andes, struck him as the perfect subject for a film, a case that had all the ingredients of a great screenplay. Until then, it had been a private obsession of mine, filling several folders in my desk drawers over the previous six or seven years.

I don't know where I first read about those peculiar German settlers who put down their roots in Chile in the 1960s. Maybe I overheard a conversation in my parents' house. Or perhaps I picked up the trail in a newspaper report. Or while chatting with friends. But I do recall the first association I made, simple, naïve and also very clear. When I heard (or read) about Colonia Dignidad, I immediately remembered Colonia Tovar, a small community of Germans who settled in the mountains of Venezuela in the mid-nineteenth century, some fifty miles from Caracas. We used to go there with my parents at weekends sometimes, a popular middle-class excursion, a healthy escape from the pressures of the city. We loved it because, although the trip only took a couple of hours, we imagined we were visiting another country, somewhere in Europe. As the road climbed up into the mountains, a mysterious light mist descended and it got colder; up there they grew strawberries and blackberries, exotic fruit that we couldn't get in the city.

The arrival of those settlers was a tragic and terrible epic, full of elements worthy of being recounted in a film. My mother, who always enjoys explaining the hidden part of stories, bought a pamphlet in the small museum in the village and read it during the car journey home. In 1842 almost four hundred settlers had left Baden, on the east bank of the Rhine, in search of a new home. Tempted by the land and other inducements offered by the brand-new governments of the brand-new countries of the Americas, they came to Venezuela. Before reaching the port of La Guaira some of them fell sick with smallpox and had to be quarantined on the ship that had brought them to their new lives. By the time the passengers were allowed to disembark, half of them had already died. The survivors hacked a path through the jungle with their machetes, toiling uphill, doing battle with tropical nature in all its fierce exuberance, until they finally came to a place bearing some remote resemblance in climate and conditions to the mountains they had left behind in the Black Forest. With obstinacy and hard work they transformed the land into a fertile agricultural holding.

Despite the promises, no Venezuelan government ever provided the help or support that had been agreed. The settlers built their houses, tilled the soil, planted their crops and forgot about the rest of the world. And Venezuela forgot about them. Until, a century later, at the start of the 1950s, a rebellious and adventurous young settler, tired of the strict regime established by the elders, turned around and retraced the steps of his great-grandparents. He made contact with the Germany Embassy, whose staff were surprised to find that he spoke a German dialect that was no longer in use anywhere in Germany itself.

At that point, speaking from the driver's seat in the darkness inside the car, my father, a doctor, made his scientific contribution to the story my mother was telling. Because the settlers had lived in isolation for decades, they only married and reproduced among themselves: relatives with relatives, cousins with cousins, each generation more inbred than the last. This endogamy multiplied the likelihood that their descendants would suffer from genetic defects and deleterious recessive alleles. As a result, certain anomalies, defects and deformities were common among the most recent generation of settlers.

None of the children in the back seat asked what 'endogamy' or 'genetic defects' were but I retained that strange resonant phrase: 'recessive alleles'.

We always stayed in a small hotel next to a watermill. The building was copied from houses in Bavaria, with a red roof and whitewashed walls, criss-crossed with dark timbers. The rooms were furnished with exquisitely carved beds and chairs and knitted bedspreads. I went out with my brothers to pilfer strawberries from a field behind the hotel. In addition to the pleasure of stealing and eating strawberries or of wearing warm clothing (hats and jumpers!) we enjoyed roaming around a village that looked as if it had come out of a fairytale.

My fascination was related to the likely and disturbing proximity of those recessive alleles my father had told us about. What were they, these alleles? Were only some of the settlers affected by them or were all of the inhabitants born with them, with six fingers on their hands, a hooved foot, some frightful deformity hidden between the folds of their clothes?

I wanted to see the alleles. And, at the same time, the risk of glimpsing six fingers on the hand of the pretty blonde girl who served us breakfast in the hotel terrified me. Colonia Tovar was a fairytale village that concealed monsters behind its curtains.

An abyss of circumstances separated the story of the settlers of Tovar from Colonia Dignidad in Chile. Despite this, I couldn't help linking these two places together: hidden, sealed off, living with their backs to the world. And perhaps I took an interest in the settlers in Chile precisely in order to follow the trail

of the monster. In the case of Colonia Dignidad, there were lots of monsters on the loose, in plain sight, right at the surface. In that, at least, my producer friend was correct when he said it had all the ingredients of a film. It was easy to identify them just from the headlines of the (few) reports that had been published about the colony in Spain: connections with Nazism, collaboration with Pinochet's dictatorship, an obscure and mysterious sect, human trafficking, shadowy international networks linked to arms smuggling and one final and, if possible, even more shocking element: paedophilia.

Although I'd never written a screenplay in my life, I'd been reading about the subject for ages and felt fairly confident about my knowledge, so I accepted the offer. "You'll do a good job; if you've already written books, then doing a screenplay will be a walk in the park," my producer friend told me. The two books I'd 'written' were a guide I'd been commissioned to produce, entitled "100 Ways to Make a Living as a Writer" and a relatively minor contribution to an encyclopaedia of Latin American rock music.

The reports I had collected during the first years of my research, the ones that came out in some foreign newspapers early in 1999, talked about the discovery of an underground chamber which confirmed what a lot of people already knew: that the colony had been a detention and torture centre during the dictatorship. At the time, the sect's leader, Onkel Paul, was on the run, accused of "indecent assault", a euphemism that referred to the rape not only of the children of German settlers but also of local Chilean children who had been kidnapped. Pinochet was under arrest in London, waiting to see if he would be extradited to Spain or would be allowed to return to Chile.

All I had were some notes, but the discovery of the torture chamber where at least thirty-eight opponents of the regime had been held and assassinated was the start of a more systematic search, to which I dedicated my free time and which took me back to the colony's foundation in 1961 and the first escapes by settlers, who denounced the atrocities occurring there – without anyone taking the least bit of notice of them. Every time I unravelled one thread, I found dozens more to follow, each more twisted and bizarre than the last.

A few years after it was founded, Colonia Dignidad closed its borders, converting itself into a state within a state. Governed by a quasi-feudal system, its inhabitants made their living from agriculture and livestock farming, and worked in sub-human conditions (without pay) for their master, Onkel Paul. In the colony, the lord wielded absolute power over the lives of his serfs. Men and women couldn't live together; no wedding could be celebrated without the leader's consent; children were separated from their parents at birth. Nobody was allowed to leave the settlement, whose inhabitants lacked identification documents. Nor did they have access to television, radio or the press. Many of the settlers were treated with drugs, beaten and punished, and even subjected to experiments in the colony hospital. All the settlers had to confess to Onkel Paul daily and to inform on their companions.

The only ones with certain privileges were the elders, a court consisting of six or seven families that managed the colony's lucrative business activities. In addition to agriculture (mainly wheat but also some fruit and vegetables) and livestock, they ran two restaurants outside the colony, on the Chillán road and in Bulnes. For a time they even mined titanium and uranium on their land. During the dictatorship they dedicated themselves to arms trafficking (in 2005, the largest private arsenal of weapons ever to be seized in Latin America was found in the colony). In addition to land and buildings, numerous bank accounts are believed to be held in tax havens that have not yet been investigated.

Until very recently, all access to Colonia Dignidad was controlled by guards, and the settlement contained a network of tunnels and underground storage depots stacked with weapons and explosives. The colony's aircraft took off without informing the Chilean authorities. Its guards used

dogs to track down fugitives and even pursued some of them all of the way to the capital. And until 1997, despite countless requests, neither the police nor the press had been allowed to enter.

On 10 March 2005, following a media pursuit led by the journalist Carola Fuentes, Chile's most wanted fugitive – Onkel Paul or the Eternal Uncle – was tracked down by the police to a house in Tortuguitas, a town some thirty-five miles outside Buenos Aires.

I delivered a detailed report of all these events to my producer, identifying dates, facts and protagonists. A short precise report that wouldn't bore him. And I made it clear that I didn't exactly want to write a story about 'the case' (or the many cases) of Colonia Dignidad. I explained that it had been the subject of several books and a number of documentaries full of accurate information, meticulous timelines, detailed research – and even a few fictional movies. I didn't want to summarize information that had already appeared on TV, in the cinema, in the press and in books. I was more interested in personal stories, an everyday perspective, a small story that would reveal the day to day lives of the settlers. Beyond the terrible reality in which they were immersed, beyond the torture they were subjected to, the forced labour, the drugs that were used to keep them docile, I wanted to discover (and to tell) how they lived and what it meant to have grown up in total isolation: how someone who has grown up without television, without newspapers, without information, without being allowed to walk down the street, thinks and how they see the world; someone who has never been to a concert or to the cinema or to a party or to a museum; someone who has never handled their own money or opened a bank account, who has never bought a book or rented a house; someone who was only half-aware of the military coup, who perhaps never heard of the war in Bosnia; someone who knew nothing of the UN, the IMF, the OAS, the minimum salary, the internet, email; someone who had never had basic life experiences such as kissing a boy, going to college, getting married, having a family, celebrating a birthday; someone who had never been on holiday or even enjoyed a day off. And above all I was interested in hearing how the former settlers coped with the process of returning to 'normal' society. How those who escaped felt when they saw the world almost for the first time and how they handled life without the 'security' and 'order' that the colony promised. Nobody talked about that.

I also told him I felt I'd read all I could from a distance. Now I needed to do on-the-spot research, interview those involved, try to get inside the colony. And so, a few weeks after submitting this proposal and without having the slightest guarantee that my friend's company was really interested in paying me to develop the outline, I started to plan my trip to Chile.

I took leave of absence from my job, gave up the best flat I'd ever had, in the Torre Madrid skyscraper, and went to stay with Cecilia and Pablo, two friends who'd offered to put me up. So that was it. I would leave Spain, at least for six months. I'd return to a country I barely knew, despite the fact that I had always carried a passport with the coat of arms of the Republic of Chile on its cover.

I arrived in Santiago in January 2006, just as Michelle Bachelet was elected president. That evening I went out to celebrate on the Alameda, the city's main avenue. As I walked among the crowds, a sentimental song was playing over the loudspeakers. It was all about someone returning to their beloved country after a long exile, leaving sorrow and disappointment behind as their life became whole again.

"If you're going to write about the colony, you have to get in touch with Fernández." That was the first thing my friend, the writer Sergio Gómez, said. He gave me Fernández's phone number – they'd been at school together – and he said goodbye with a warning: "Take care with those Germans: people say they're still dangerous and that even now their networks extend everywhere." I was shocked. I had

turned up plenty of unexpected things while researching Colonia Dignidad. But I struggled to believe they could pose a threat to a journalist (or a researcher or a writer or a screenwriter) like me.

I called Fernández and I spent many evenings with this kind, tenacious, enthusiastic, cheerful man who generously shared his archives with me and provided me with masses of documents, information, phone numbers and clues. He was a lawyer who specialized in child abuse cases, and his mission had begun in the mid-nineties when he received a phone call that, just like in the movies, changed his life: a woman was looking for someone to represent her son, who had been abused in a town in the south. At the time, Fernández didn't know that the case concerned Colonia Dignidad.

“Christian managed to escape from the colony in July 1996. He was the youngest of the *sprinters*, as the boys in Onkel Paul's entourage were known. He was eight years old and his medical file was terrifying. That was the first case I handled,” Fernández told me when we met. “Imagine a woman finding out that her child has been abused. She could react in so many different ways. She could grab a knife and go and stab the abuser, for example. But this woman was very careful and she managed to get her son out by talking to Onkel Paul himself. She was helped by the pastor, Adrian Bravo, who was still part of the inner circle of those who were allowed to dine with Schäfer. And Adrian accompanied her when she summoned up all of her courage and went to speak to Onkel Paul, this man that she knew had raped her son, and she convinced him to allow her to take the boy. She told him ‘I need the boy for a day, because I'm claiming maintenance from his father. I just need him for the hearing, I'll bring him straight back.’ That was very intelligent and very brave.”

The woman took the boy to Parral and the medical report confirmed a loss of anal tone, a clear symptom of sexual abuse. Moreover, Christian, unlike the other children whose cases Fernández was handling, could remember what the colony's leader had done to him.

“Many of the boys only remembered part of what happened because, apart from two of them, who gave evidence of really terrible scenes, the rest didn't remember or just said ‘he touched me’. But they had injuries that needed surgery... it's so awful that I'm really reluctant to show you the reports... I've seen lots of medical reports during my time, I've seen serious injuries in cases of the rape of five-year-old girls, but I'd never seen anything like this in boys. Injuries that were consistent with ongoing rape. And lots of the boys didn't remember anything. Given that Onkel Paul and the doctors in the colony were very familiar with psychotropics, I'm sure he drugged them. And one of the boys said he was given ‘some juice’ before going to bed.”

With the leads that Fernández began to unravel with that first call, he took on fifteen cases against Colonia Dignidad and its elders. He started with the cases of Chilean children who had been kidnapped from farming families in the surrounding area, using all sorts of ruses. Mothers who took their kids to the colony hospital only to be told a few days later that the child had died, for example. Several of them were illiterate and were tricked into signing dubious adoption papers.

After the Chilean kids, Fernández started looking into the claims of former German settlers. And, more recently, the mysterious disappearance of Boris Weisfeiler, a Soviet-born Jewish-American mathematician who had gone missing near the colony in 1985.

Compared to his gigantic dedication, my own obsession with the colony was Lilliputian. My research suddenly seemed pathetic when compared to the efforts of a man who had dedicated more than a decade to defending abused children and former settlers. While Fernández talked to me and searched through the metal filing cabinet in his cramped office, I asked myself if that man – in his mid-thirties, short, bald, with a friendly face – would make a great character in my screenplay. Could he be the

hero? Or, rather, what real elements of his personality, of his history, should I highlight to create the hero I needed if I wanted my screenplay to follow the classical structure?