

1

This is the story of Gastón and of his best friend, Max; it is also the story of Kitten, Gastón's dog, and of Pol, Max's son. There are lots of other characters in this story, but we're going to accompany Gastón at all times, as if we were floating just behind him and had access to his feelings, his sensations, the flow of this thoughts. Basically, we're a bunch of prying busybodies; we'll have to be cautious, then, or else he might push us aside and put an end to our plan. Our plan is to reach the last page of this book (don't go thinking this is some kind of conspiracy), and this is why we must follow Gastón, in the present, until we reach the end. The present is here, here as we write and here as we read. Here. The place, too, the city in which the story unfolds, is here. On this page – no need to go looking for it further on. After all, time and space are the same thing. Our place is the time we are moving through; the present is our place of residence. The past we will gradually come to understand along the way, because it is the connection between the present and future. The past will be the finger that will turn the pages of this book.

Let's turn the page: the future is there.

2

They are alone in the empty restaurant, 13.8 billion years after the birth of our universe, watching a match played by the city team, the team for which the best footballer on Earth plays, and drinking a second beer at the bar; Gastón on the customers' side, with Kitten lying at his feet, dozing, and Max on the barman's side. It's a rustic wooden bar, painted green, which aims to imitate those from Max's native land, although the peppers that decorate it are more reminiscent of those from the Near East; the carpenter Max hired was, in fact, Near Eastern, and he turned out to be a good carpenter – efficient and reliable – but useless when it came to vernacular styles from other lands. The metal shutters at the entrance are down and there is a sign saying *CLOSED FOR THE HOLIDAYS*, which is how Max plans to avoid having to explain things to his customers and local residents.

'What if we bought the premises?' Gastón asks Max.

This is Max, or what is left of him, if we pay attention to how Gastón feels when he looks at his friend. Max, his shoulders hunched and his eyes permanently lowered ever since he discovered the multicoloured sweetie game on his phone. He's going through a rough patch, Max; first his son had to

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go and live far away for work, and then he lost his restaurant, or rather was swindled out of it. The landlord sold it behind his back, taking advantage of the rental agreement having expired, without giving him a chance to renegotiate. Since then, Max has shut himself away in the building that is both the restaurant and his home; this arrangement, which, years ago, was a practical solution – living in the same building as the restaurant, which occupies the ground floor – now helps facilitate his monastic routine. In the morning he comes down from the third floor, spends the day in the restaurant not doing anything, and goes back up when he's finished (and since not doing anything is an activity that can easily spiral out of control, he tends to go back up pretty late, generally in the early hours of the morning). He has just a few days left to hand over the premises, and the only thing he has done, the only decision he has made, is not to open the place up again to customers.

Inside, it smells of rancid, fried sunflower oil, the topped-up, reheated oil in which there remains perhaps a billionth of a litre of the original oil into which Max threw a few triangles of corn tortilla for the first time almost thirty years ago to make a plate of nachos with avocado salsa. Every TV in the place is switched on, including the huge screen in the dining area, because there's a system that controls them all simultaneously. It must be possible to operate them independently, but that would involve working out how, asking the technician who installed them, or racking his brains to remember, and this is one of the many things that Max ought to be doing but continues to put off, as if there were no cut-off date, no deadline on the calendar, not the last day of the month. The volume on the TVs is down; we are missing the strident voice of the commentator, his litany of words

pouring out in the native language, and the general hubbub of customers drinking on their feet, crowding around the bar, for it to be just any old night.

‘I haven’t got any money,’ Max replies.

‘I’ve got savings,’ Gastón says; ‘we could go into business together.’

‘I’m tired,’ Max replies, without lifting his head, staring at the screen of his phone instead of the game. ‘I don’t want to talk about this.’

Gastón knows that when Max says he’s tired he means that he’s already written off this and other options. Rents in the neighbourhood have gone up so much that he’d be forced to pay almost double for new premises; he could move to a cheaper location, although then he would lose his regular customers and have to start all over again from zero, something that seems deplorable to him at his age (Max is fifty-five years old, one year younger than Gastón).

The screens show that the best footballer on Earth has stopped running. He is leaning forwards, his hands on his knees, and spitting, or perhaps vomiting. The game continues, although the cameras remain on him, as if the ball were merely an accessory or the aim of the game were to suffer some kind of ailment.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ Gastón asks, addressing the air, addressing an interlocutor who is not outside his head, addressing himself, this page, us.

He picks up the remote control and turns the sound up to hear the commentator say that in the land where the best footballer on Earth was born they’re reporting that he’s afraid, that he has anxiety attacks, and that this is why he is incapable of leading his side to a World Cup win. Meanwhile, the city team is passing the ball back and forth, making its

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opponents dizzy, waiting for the hero to regain his composure. Gastón turns the volume back down again. All at once, Max emerges from the daze he's in, leans over the bar and holds some nachos out to the dog. Kitten flattens his ears and his eyes fill with tears; it's the same expression he makes whenever he's sick on Gastón's sofa or his bed. We assume that he's trying to say yes, but he is a dog. A dog in pain. Last week, Gastón took him to the vet's after finding a lump on his chest. It was a mass of abnormal cells, malignant ones, which had already spread through his whole body.

'When does the treatment start?' Max asks, plunging his hand into a giant bag of nachos. He walks around the bar in slow motion, places a handful of fried tortillas on the floor, in front of the dog's muzzle, and kisses the top of his head.

Gastón replies with an insult that shocks us, an insult that mentions Max's mother, or rather, not exactly *his* mother; it's one of those rhetorical insults so common in Max's native land and which Gastón has adopted as his own after so many years alongside his friend.

Is Gastón an irascible guy? Another one of those angry maniacs so common in the history of literature? Let's hope not. We're tired of stories about men with chips on their shoulders, fed up with glorifying resentment and frustration. No, it's OK; now we understand what's going on: someone has just scored a goal against the city's team.

3

They say that the Far Easterners have been buying up everything in the neighbourhood. Cafés, bars, restaurants, traditional businesses like haberdashers or corner shops, which they turn into budget bazaars selling household goods for a few cents. Gastón interrogates Yu, the Far Easterner from the budget bazaar on the same corner as the restaurant (Max has refused to give him the details). But this time it's not the Far Easterners; our assumptions were too hasty. They are from the East, but not the Far East, the Near East.

'The same ones who opened up the new greengrocer's around the corner,' Yu explains, making a superhuman effort to pronounce the r's in the word 'greengrocer's'.

Gastón makes his way over there. But they're not from the Near East, either; they are North Easterners.

4

The North Easterner in the greengrocer's insists that Gastón properly identify himself if he wants to talk business; he needs to know where he comes from and what he does, in order to activate the territorial and trade-related codes of trust, or of distrust. It is not easy to determine where Gastón comes from; his skin, darker than that of the Peninsulars, his cheeks, which are broad, his almost grey eyes, and the abundance of hair on his ears, which, more than a physical attribute, is a lycanthropic sign of premature ageing, all produce a peculiar visual effect, resistant to classification. The way he speaks doesn't help, either; the strange accent with which he intones the colonising language after so many years of living here (more than thirty), and the vocabulary, which is a blend of his own quaint lexicon with that of the Peninsula, with that of Max, and with sayings and expressions taken from the indigenous language.

'I'm from the Southern Cone,' Gastón says. 'Southern Conish. I have the market garden up behind the Historic Park.'

'On the hill?' the North Easterner asks, in surprise.

'It's good land,' Gastón replies; 'I just need to clear it and put some terraces in. If you want to come along one day, I'll show you round; we can have a beer.'

The North Easterner asks him if he supplies the shops owned by his rivals. The two men are surrounded by crates of fruit and vegetables and yet Gastón feels out of place, a farmer in an umbrella factory. The merchandise gleams in the light of the pre-spring morning, too clean, too brightly coloured, everything waxed or wrapped in plastic. There are almost no traces of earth, no smells. The label stuck to each one of the crates indicates the thousands of miles of transport by sea or by land, from enormous plots worked by semi-slave labour in the South Eastern or South Western parts of the Earth.

Gastón explains that his is a small plot, that his customers are restaurants and individuals, that he grows herbs, fruit and exotic vegetables, the stuff that gets called ‘gourmet’ or ‘ethnic’, and that for many years now he has in fact grown the peppers that Max uses to make the sauces for the nachos and stews from his native land.

‘And you can live off that?’ the North Easterner asks.

It’s a good question, characteristic of someone with enough economic nous to understand that agriculture is only a viable business as long as the volume of production increases. Gastón replies that it’s enough to get by, that he is capable of looking after the plot on his own and that he has few expenses and no family. Nonetheless, this does not explain his having enough money to buy the restaurant, but this train of thought appears to be one the North Easterner does not immediately engage in, or, if he does, he keeps it to himself.

At this moment, Kitten, who accompanies Gastón wherever he goes, starts whimpering and writhing around on the floor. These episodes began after his illness was detected; in all likelihood it’s a coincidence, even though we are tempted

to attribute it to some perceptive power on the part of the dog, as if the diagnosis had stimulated his pain receptors. Gastón bends down to try and soothe the animal; this time, the episode lasts only a few seconds, Kitten grows calm again and remains lying on the floor, fearing that if he moves the pain might come back; he stays so motionless that it looks more like superstition than a reflex. In his doggy logic of cause and effect, when he lies down, the pain goes away.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ the North Easterner asks.

‘He has a genetic mutation,’ Gastón replies. ‘It’s just been diagnosed.’

All at once he grows emotional, his cheeks burn and his tear ducts receive the alert: here come the sadness hormones. The North Easterner realises what’s going on.

‘It won’t work,’ he says.

Gastón replies that he doesn’t understand.

‘If this is some kind of negotiation tactic, making me feel sorry for your dog,’ the North Easterner explains. ‘I can’t sell. The restaurant’s for my brother – he’s moving here with his family and we need the land the premises are on to apply for the visa.’

He explains that in his native land there is no work and no soil to cultivate, that the soil was devastated in the last border war between the North Easterners from the north and the North Easterners from the south, the war in which his wife, the mother of his daughter, died. He says all this coldly, perhaps so Gastón doesn’t think that he’s raising the stakes in the commiseration competition; and then the North Easterner turns his head and looks behind him, towards the door leading to the back room of the shop, where a little girl has appeared, as if to prove he isn’t lying. She must be three or four years old; more likely just turned three very

recently, because if she were older she would be at nursery at this hour. She comes over slowly, dragging her feet and wrestling with her shyness, until she reaches the spot on the floor where Kitten is lying. She says something to her father in a language we don't understand.

'She wants to know what the dog is called,' the North Easterner says.

Gastón tells her, repeating it three times, emphasising each syllable distinctly, assuming that this way it's more likely that the little girl will understand him. The North Easterner seems confused by the contradiction in the dog's name, but he says nothing, perhaps because he thinks he has misunderstood (this assumption is ours). The little girl, meanwhile, sees no contradiction; after all, it was another child – Pol, Max's son – who many years ago gave the dog this name.

'And what about you?' Gastón asks.

Her father replies that she is called Varushka. The little girl bends down to look closely at the dog and says something.

'She's asking if she can stroke him,' the North Easterner translates.

Gastón says yes, that the dog loves children. The North Easterner performs his role as interpreter. The child sits down on the floor and runs her right hand gently over Kitten's head, over and over, all the while repeating, over and over again, a sweet, short phrase, like a little song, like the magic spell in a fairy tale.

'She says that he's a very pretty wolf,' the North Easterner translates.

5

As soon as he wakes up, Gastón makes a video call to Pol, Max's son. Pol finished his Biology degree and, after a period of inactivity alarmingly similar to that of the microbes that were the focus of his thesis, got a job with a team of scientists researching life in extreme conditions. The work compels him to live in a frozen place far away, above the snow line, in the Tundra, six hours ahead towards the East of the West where Gastón and Max live. It seems like an exciting job, and it is, but the contract is only for a year and its extension depends on the research institute receiving further funding. Indeed, Pol's salary is paid not by the university, but by a group of investors who are covering a portion of the institute's budget.

'He doesn't even get up to let me in,' Gastón tells Pol. 'It's lucky he gave me a set of keys for emergencies. He's got to hand over the premises at the end of the month and he's done nothing. There's food just rotting away in the fridges.'

He tries to gauge Pol's reaction through the screen of his phone; we watch over his shoulder: more than sad or concerned, the lad looks scared, although this might be for some other reason. Or perhaps this expression doesn't represent a state of mind at all but rather one of the body; perhaps it's the cold (Pol is wearing a gigantic coat). He doesn't look very

much like Max – hardly at all, in fact; at most in the signs of a receding hairline already visible at his temples, and we can't be sure that he's inherited this from his father, since baldness is multigenetic. If it weren't for the fact that Gastón is talking to him, it would be hard for us to guess that this is Pol. But since we do know this, we can try to picture his mother, in comparison to Max: darker-skinned, nose a little more snub, lips slightly thinner, and that slightly wonky set of teeth in the jaw, as if they were false and might clatter out at the first sign of a laugh.

Is this what Pol's mother looked like? We have no way of knowing, and in fact it doesn't matter, because the truth does not reside in an image but rather in the process of imagining, in what happens between mind and matter, in how we tell this story. In fact, Gastón barely remembers her (she and Max never lived together as a couple), and only saw her a few times when Pol first started school and he, Gastón, would give his friend a hand with the logistics of shared custody, that tangle of timetables, changes of clothes, rucksacks and lunch boxes, shortly before she had the car crash while on holiday in her native land, the same place Max comes from.

Pol is shivering, and we feel sure that, if the connection were better, we'd be able to hear his teeth chattering.

'Do you not have any heating out there?' Gastón asks him.

'I'm at the university,' Pol replies. 'I've come out into the corridor so no one hears us.'

'Can anyone understand us in the Tundra?'

'There are people from all over here, quite a few from the Southern Cone, some from the Peninsula.'

'What's the temperature there today?'

'Right now? Minus twenty-five.'

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According to what Pol has told him, it could be far worse: there are days, in this period of the year when winter's grip is particularly hard and spring is in no hurry, when the thermometer displays ten degrees lower than that.

'Where are you?' Pol asks. 'I can hardly see you.'

Gastón replies that he's at home, sitting in the living room, and asks Pol to wait while he turns on the light, because the Earth hasn't turned sufficiently yet to bring him out of the gloom. He leaves his phone on the coffee table and gets up, and we seize the opportunity to move our gaze away from the device's screen and take a look around, at the solid pieces of old, heavy furniture, from back when there was real wood, from back when there were still forests and we chopped down trees with abandon. We also see the twentieth-century curtains and tablecloth, made from industrially produced polyester, and the dinner service with its gilt edges, displayed in the cabinet. It's an old dinner service, which belonged to the woman who owns the house, but it's not antique: it's merely old and chipped, like all the things here, the remains of another life that Gastón had no problem stepping into when he moved in, without making them his own, without adjusting them at all, like a traveller who planned on stopping here just for one night. Many years ago, the owner had to be admitted to an old people's home and the family put the house up for rent; Gastón installed himself there just as a son of hers would have done if she'd had one. The woman died quite some time ago, and since then the agency has been transferring the rent money to a niece who doesn't live in the city. There is a bedroom, a room that serves as a utility room, a kitchen and a bathroom, but not one photo, no picture frame, not a trace of the four or five romantic partners Gastón has had, nor of any family or

ancestors, as if he has just popped up out of nowhere, out of thin air, although, in actual fact, he came from the same place we all come from, from the womb of a mother (who died when he was a teenager), from a land he felt excluded from because it always seemed alien to him, a quirk of fate he corrected by leaving as soon as possible.

‘We’ve got to do something about your dad,’ Gastón insists, when he picks up the phone again, going back to their conversation.

Pol tells him that it’ll pass, that his father will grow tired of being shut up indoors, that he’s grieving for the restaurant but is ultimately a man of action who doesn’t know how to stay still. That he’s been working non-stop for a long time and deserves a bit of a break.

‘Can you not come home?’ Gastón asks. ‘I’m sure that would cheer him up, he really misses you.’

‘Not right now,’ Pol replies. ‘It’s not a good time. We’re on the verge of something really big. I can’t tell you what it is; there are confidentiality clauses, you know how it is. But I’ll come home as soon as I can, I promise.’

Gastón watches on the screen as Pol looks off to one side, and hears him say something in a language we don’t understand.

‘I’ve got to go,’ Pol says.

He pauses so as to soften the goodbye, so as not to seem rude.

‘How’s Kitten?’ he asks.

‘He asks after you every day,’ Gastón replies, so that he doesn’t have to talk about the dog’s health.

‘Give him a kiss from me,’ Pol says. ‘And look after Dad, please. I’ll be checking in.’ He gestures goodbye with his free gloved hand and then, before hanging up, remembers

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something. He asks Gastón if he knows what's going on with his grandfather, which surprises Gastón, not just due to the sudden shift in the conversation, but because this is a topic they don't usually speak about. Gastón and Max's father have only ever spent time together during the occasional visits of the old man, who lives in the opposite direction in both space and time, nine hours behind Gastón and Max, fifteen hours behind Pol, on the edge of the western part of the West, in the Peninsula of one of the ex-Colonies. There have been very few visits – perhaps four or five in the thirty years he has known Max.

'Is something up?' Gastón asks.

'Hasn't my dad told you?' Pol replies.

Gastón imagines it must be some sort of health issue; Pol's grandfather isn't that old – he can't be much more than seventy – but this is an age when news often has a finality to it.

'Is he ill?' he asks.

'No, it's not that – Dad'll explain,' Pol replies, and he hangs up.