

## THE SURPRISE

The moment he opened the door to the manager's office, with its milk-glass panels, Erdosain tried to back out; he could see he was done for, but it was too late.

They were waiting for him: the manager, a man with a pig's head, a true snout and implacability oozing out of his small fish gray pupils; Gualdi, the accountant, small, slight, bland as honey, with eyes that missed nothing; and the assistant manager, the son of the pigheaded man, thirty, good-looking, his hair gone completely white, an air of great cynicism about him, an edge to his voice and the harsh eyes of his progenitor. These three characters, the boss, bending over the payroll, the assistant manager, lolling in an easy chair with one leg dangling over the back, and Mr. Gualdi standing respectfully by the desk, did not return Erdosain's greeting. Only the assistant manager went so far as to raise his head:

"We hear that you're an embezzler, that you've taken six hundred pesos from us."

"And seven cents," added Mr. Gualdi, applying his blotter to the signature on the payroll that his boss had checked off. The latter then looked up from the paper with an abrupt movement of his bull neck. Hands clasped against the front of his jacket, the boss was evidently calculating behind his half-closed lids as he coolly examined Erdosain's gaunt, impassive face.

"Why are you so badly dressed?"

"Because I don't make much as a bill collector."

"What about the money you stole from us?"

"I didn't steal anything. That's a lie."

"All right then, can you square up your accounts?"

"By today at noon, if you want."

That answer saved him for the moment. The three men exchanged glances, and finally, the assistant manager, with the tacit consent of his father, said:

"No...you have until three tomorrow. Bring the payroll with you and all the receipts...You can go now."

This turn of events came as such a surprise that Erdosain just kept standing there, forlorn, looking at the three of them. Yes, just looking at them. Mr. Gualdi, who despite his professed socialism had humiliated him so deeply; the assistant manager, who had stared with such rude persistence at his frayed tie; the manager, whose stiff, close-cropped, pig head was aimed right at him, with obscene cynicism seeping through the gray slit in his half-closed lids.

And still, Erdosain did not leave...He wanted to find words that would make them grasp the immense sorrow that weighed upon his life; and so he kept on standing there like that, sadly, the great black mass of the iron cash register looming up in front of him, feeling himself grow more hunched with each passing minute while he nervously fingered the brim of his black hat and his eyes took on the sad look of a hunted man. Then, suddenly, he asked:

"So, can I go now?"

"Yes..."

"No...Give Suárez the receipts and be here tomorrow at three sharp and have the whole amount with you then."

"Yes...the whole amount..." and, turning, he left without saying good-bye.

He walked down Chile Street to the Paseo Colon. He felt some invisible force fencing him in. The setting sun lit up the most revolting inner recesses of the sloping street. Conflicting thoughts seethed inside him, such a crazy mix that they would have taken hours to sort out.

Later he realized that he had never even thought to ask who had blown the whistle on him.

## STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

He knew he was a thief. But the name they gave him didn't much affect him. Perhaps the word thief didn't strike a chord with his inner state. What he did feel was a round silence that bored through his skull like a steel cylinder, anesthetizing him to anything unrelated to his unhappiness.

This circle of silence and darkness cut into the flow of his ideas, so Erdosain could not associate, with his deteriorating reason, his home, now known as a house, with some institution called a jail.

He thought telegraphically, skipping prepositions, which is enervating. He had known empty hours when he might have committed any crime without feeling the least responsibility. Of course a judge would never understand that sort of thing. But now he was drained empty, he was the shell of a man kept in motion by force of habit.

If he stayed on at the Sugar Company, it would not be to keep stealing more money but because he was waiting for something extraordinary to happen—immensely extraordinary—that would give his life an unexpected charge and save him from the catastrophe looming in his future.

Erdosain had a name for the atmosphere compounded of dreaming and restlessness that kept him wandering in circles like a sleepwalker through the days of his life: "the anguish zone."

Erdosain pictured this zone as lying two meters above the city streets, and he could see it quite graphically, shaped like those great salt flats or deserts that are shown on maps as ovals full of dots, thick as herring roe.

This anguish zone came out of all the suffering of mankind. And like a cloud of poison gas it moved heavily from one place to another, penetrating solid walls and slicing through buildings without losing its flat, horizontal form; two-dimensional anguish that slashed through throats like a guillotine, leaving an aftertaste of bitter sobbing.

That was the explanation Erdosain came up with when he felt the first waves of nauseous grief.

"What am I doing with my life?" he would then ask himself, perhaps hoping to clarify with this question the source of an anxiety that made him long for a life where each tomorrow would not simply be more of today, but something novel and always unexpected, like the sudden turns of plot in an American movie, where yesterday's beggar is today's underground chieftain and the gold-digging secretary is a multimillionaire incognito.

His thirst for marvels, which could never possibly be slaked—since he was a frustrated inventor and a crook about to land in jail—and the rationalizations and doubts it always entailed left him churning with acidity and gritting his teeth as if he had bit into a lemon.

At such times, he could fall back on a stock of absurd notions. He imagined that the wealthy, tired of hearing the snivelings of the oppressed, built great horse-drawn cages. Hangmen, picked for their inhuman strength, pursued the wretches with choke collars, until he envisaged a whole scene: a mother, tall and disheveled, ran behind the cage where, from behind bars, her crosseyed child cried out to her, until a "dogcatcher," tired of hearing her screams, knocked her out by clobbering her over the head with the butt end of his whip.

After this nightmare vision dissolved, Erdosain wondered, in self-revulsion:

"What kind of soul do I have?" And as his imagination was still racing from the last nightmare scene, he went on to another. "I must have been born to be a lackey. One of those vile perfumed lackeys rich prostitutes keep around to do up their bras, while the lover lounges on the sofa with a cigar."

And his thoughts again slithered down to the kitchen in the basement of a luxurious mansion. Maids flitted around the table, and there was a chauffeur and an Arab vending garters and perfume. In this setting he would wear a black jacket that came just to his rear and a little white tie. Suddenly the "master" would call him: a man exactly like him physically, except with a mustache and glasses. He did not know what his boss wanted him for, but he would never forget the funny look the man gave him as he left the estate. And he went back to the kitchen for some locker-room talk with the chauffeur, who delighted the maids and bored the Arab pederast by telling how he had ruined the daughter of a great lady, a child of tender years. And again he repeated to himself: "Yes, I am a

lackey. I have the soul of a true lackey," and he clenched his teeth with pleasure at the way he insulted and debased himself in his own eyes.

At other times he saw himself emerge from the bedroom of some devout old maid, unctuously bearing a heavy chamberpot, but just then he would be met by an assiduous priest, attached to the household, who, with smiling neutrality, would ask:

"Keeping up with our religious duties, Ernesto?" And he, Ernesto, Ambrosio, or José, would live the slimy life of an obscene, hypocritical servant.

Just the thought of it sent a shiver of madness coursing through him.

He knew, ah, how well he knew, that he was bruising and soiling his soul out of sheer perversity. Deliberately wallowing in the mire, he suffered the terror of one who, in a nightmare, falls down the abyss but does not die.

Because at times he longed for humiliation, like those saints who would kiss the sores of lepers, not from compassion but to be yet more unworthy of God's love, since they would revolt Him by their repulsive deeds.

But these images faded, and all that was left in his mind was the "desire to know the meaning of life," and he would tell himself:

"No, I am no lackey...no, I am not..." and he would have liked to ask his wife to take pity on him, to feel grief and pity for his horrible, vile thoughts. But remembering how she had made so many sacrifices for him filled him with blind fury, and at such times he would have liked to kill her.

And he knew all too well that some day she would turn to another man and that was yet more fuel added to everything that went to make up his anguish.

So when he stole the first twenty pesos, he was surprised how easily he could "do it," since before he got started he had thought he would have to overcome any number of scruples which he was no longer in a condition to feel. Then he reflected:

"It's just a matter of working up one's will and doing it, simple as that."

And "it" made life a little easier, with "it" he had money that felt alien, since it was acquired through no effort of his own. And the amazing thing for Erdosain was not the thievery itself, but that his face should show no sign of his crime. He was forced to steal because his monthly pay was so meager. Eighty, a hundred, a hundred and twenty pesos, since it depended on how much he collected; he was paid a commission per hundred pesos of bills he collected.

So, some days he carried four to five thousand pesos on his undernourished person and made do with a stinking, fake leather billfold, inside of which happiness piled up in the form of paper money, checks, money orders, and vouchers.

His wife nagged about the way she was always deprived of this or that; he would hear out her reproaches in silence and later, alone, he would wonder:

"What can I do?"

When he got the idea, when that idea started to grow, how he might steal from his bosses, he felt like an inventor yelling eureka. Steal? But how come he had only thought of it now?

And Erdosain was amazed by his own oversight, even accusing himself of lacking drive, since in those days (three months before the events of this story), he was painfully deprived of all kinds of necessary things, although vast sums of money streamed through his hands every day.

And what made his thievery so easy was the lax way the Sugar Company kept its books.