

ALL MEN ARE LIARS

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1.

Apologia

“What of a truth that is bounded
by these mountains and is falsehood
to the world that lives beyond?”

– Michel de Montaigne,
An Apology for Raymond Sebond

Frankly, I’m the last person you should be asking about Alejandro Bevilacqua. What can I tell you, my dear Terradillos, about someone I haven’t seen for thirty years? I mean I hardly knew him, or if I did, then it was only on a superficial level. If I’m being honest, I didn’t want to know him any better. Put it this way: I *did* know him well – I admit that now – but only in a distracted sort of way, reluctantly, if you like. Our relationship (for want of a better word) had an element of courteous formality to it, along with that shared nostalgia that is conventional among ex-patriots. I don’t know if you get my drift.

Fate threw us together, so to speak, and if you asked me now, hand on heart, if we were friends, I would have to confess that we had nothing in common, apart from the words *República Argentina*, engraved in gold letters on both our passports.

What draws you to this man, Terradillos? Is it the manner of his death? Is it the image – which still haunts my dreams even though I did not see it with my own eyes – of Bevilacqua lying on the pavement, his skull crushed, his blood running down the street to the drain, as though trying to flee from that inert body, as though refusing to be a part of such an abominable crime, of such an unjust, unforeseen ending?

I think not. You are a journalist, in love with life. You're a man of the world, I'd say, not an obituaries junkie. Far from it. It's the truth you're after, the living proof. You want to lay these facts before your readers, even though they may not be much interested in a character like Bevilacqua, a

man whose roots were once plunged into the soil of Poitou-Charentes (which, let us not forget, is your region, too, Terradillos). You want your readers to know the truth – a dangerous concept if ever there was one. You hope to redeem Bevilacqua even as he lies in the grave. You want to equip him with a new biography, furnished with details from all the memories you have pieced together. And all this for the abysmal reason that Bevilacqua's mother hailed from the same corner of the world as you. It's a lost cause, my friend! Do you know what I suggest? Find another personality – some colourful hero or high-profile celebrity – of which Poitou-Charentes can be really proud, like that heterosexual nancy-boy Pierre Loti or that bald fellow, Michel Foucault, the darling of gringo universities. You're good at writing learned articles, Terradillos, I can tell, and I know about these things. Don't waste your time on flim-flam, or the hazy memories of an old curmudgeon.

And, to return to my first question: why me?

Let me see. I was born at one of the many staging-posts of a prolonged exodus, one that took my Jewish family from the Asiatic steppes to the South American steppes; the Bevilacquas, by contrast, travelled straight from Bérghamo to what would become the Province of Santa Fé, at the end of the eighteenth century. In that remote colony, those adventurous, Italian forebears established a slaughterhouse; in 1923, to commemorate their bloody achievement, the mayor of Venado Tuerto bestowed the name Bevilacqua on one of the minor streets of the eastern zone. Bevilacqua *père* met the girl who would become his wife, Marieta Guittón, at a patriotic celebration; they were married within a few months. When Alejandro was a year old, his parents were killed in the rail disaster of 1939, and his paternal grandmother decided to take the boy to Buenos Aires, the republic's capital. She opened a delicatessen there, in the suburb of Belgrano. Bevilacqua (who, as you know, was annoyingly

fastidious about details) once made a point of telling me that the family's business had not always been in tripe and cold cuts and that, centuries ago, back in Italy, a Bevilacqua had been surgeon to the court of some cardinal or bishop. Señora Bevilacqua took pride in those vague but distinguished roots (preferring to ignore the Guittón family's Huguenot branch). She was what you'd call holier-than-thou and I believe that in seventy years she never missed a day's Mass, until the heart attack that left her an invalid.

My friend Terradillos, you think that I can paint you a portrait of Bevilacqua that is at once spirited, heartfelt and true to life; that you can pour this straight onto the page, adding a dash of Poitiers colour. But that is precisely what I cannot do. Bevilacqua certainly trusted me; he confided in me some very personal details of his life, filling my head with all kinds of intimate nonsense but, truth be told, I never understood why he was telling

me all these things. Believe me, I did nothing to encourage it – on the contrary. Perhaps he thought he saw in me, his compatriot, a concern that wasn't there, or he decided to interpret my obvious lack of affection as pragmatism. One thing's for sure and that's that he turned up at my house at all hours of the day and night – apparently oblivious to my workload or my need to earn a living – and then he would start talking to me about the past, as though this flow of words, of *his* words, could recreate for him a world that, in spite of everything, he knew or felt to be irredeemably lost. It would have been pointless to protest that I did not share his condition of exile. I had left Argentina when I was ten years younger than him, as an adolescent with a thirst for travel. After putting down tentative roots in Poitiers, I moved on to Madrid, hoping it would be a good place to write, shouldering some of that resentment that Argentines inevitably feel towards the capital of the mother country while

never actually surrendering to the cliché of living in San Sebastián or Barcelona.

Don't take these observations the wrong way: Bevilacqua was not one of those boors who get settled on your couch and then can't be shifted. On the contrary, he seemed incapable of the slightest gaffe, and that was why it was so hard to ask him to leave. Bevilacqua possessed a natural grace, a simple elegance, an understated presence. Tall and slim, he moved slowly, like a giraffe. His voice was both husky and calming. His heavy-lidded eyes, typically Latin, in my opinion, gave him a sleepy countenance, and they fixed on you in such a way that it was impossible to look away when he was talking to you. And when he reached to tug at your sleeve, with those fine, nicotine-stained fingers, you let yourself be tugged at, knowing that all resistance was futile. Not until the time came to say goodbye would I realize that he had made me waste a whole afternoon.

Perhaps one of the reasons why Bevilacqua felt so at home in Spain – even more so in those grey years – was that his imagination favoured chimeras over concrete reality. In Spain – I don't know if you agree – everything wants to make itself obvious: they put signs on every building, plaques on every monument. Of course people who really know that village-cum-city perceive Madrid as something else, semi-hidden, mysterious; the plaques are deceptive and what the tourists see is simply a *mise-en-scène*. For some strange reason, he gave more credence to the shadowy evidence before him than to the substance of his own memories and dreams. Even though he had suffered, for decades, from police fabrications and press deception, in our own country of birth, he placed a surprising faith in the press fabrications and political deception of his adopted country, defending the first lot as a bunch of lies, while these were truths.

Do you see what I mean? Bevilacqua made a distinction between true falsehood and false

truth. Did you know that he had a passion for documentaries, the drier the better? Before I knew that he was going to publish a novel, I never would have guessed that he had any talent for writing fiction, because he was the only person I knew who was capable of spending a night watching one of those films that describe a day in an Asturian meat processing plant, or a sanatorium in Algámitas.

Now, don't go thinking that I did not respect him. Bevilacqua was – let me find the *mot juste* – very sincere. If he gave you his word, you felt obliged to take it, and it would never occur to you that this might be an empty gesture or mere formality. He was like one of those men I used to see as a boy in Buenos Aires – thin as a rake, dressed in double-breasted suits, their black hair glossy with brilliantine beneath their Shabbat hats – who used to greet my mother as we walked to market. My mother (who knew about these things) said that these men's tongues were so clean that one could find out whether or not a coin

was made of silver, by placing it in their mouths: if it was false, it turned black from the slightest contact with their saliva. I think that my mother, who was a harsh judge of people, would have taken one look at Bevilacqua and declared him *Mensch*. He had something of the provincial gentleman, Alejandro Bevilacqua, an unruffled air and an absence of guile which meant that one toned down jokes when he was present and tried to be precise about anecdotes. It's not that the man lacked imagination, but that he had no talent for fantasy. Like the Apostle Saint Thomas, he needed to touch what he saw before he could believe it was real.

That is why I was so surprised the night that he turned up at my house claiming to have seen a ghost.

Let me see. Those countless mornings, afternoons and nights that I spent listening Bevilacqua drone on about dull episodes in his life – watching him smoke cigarette after cigarette, rolling them between

amber-coloured fingers, crossing and uncrossing his legs then jumping to his feet and taking great strides around my room – have merged in my memory into one single, monstrous day inhabited exclusively by this emaciated, grey man. My memory, though increasingly unreliable, is both precise and vague on this point. I mean that it does not consist in a series of clear recollections, but in an agglomeration of minutely confused memories, that seem to have been contaminated by literature. I think that I am remembering Bevilacqua but then portraits of Camus, or of Boris Vian, come to mind.

These days I share Bevilacqua's greyish hue, if not exactly his emaciation. Inconceivably, I have aged; I have got fat. He, on the other hand, remains at the age he was when I first met him – today we would call it “young”, but in those days it was “mature”. I have continued, as it were, on the story which we began together, or which Bevilacqua began, in an Argentina which is no longer ours. I know the

chapters that followed his death (I was going to say his “disappearance” but that word, my friend Terradillos, we must not use). He of course, knows nothing of that. What I mean is that the story he wove and picked apart so many times is now mine. I am the one who will decide his fate, who will make sense of his journey. That is the survivor’s duty: to tell, to recreate, to invent – why not? – other people’s stories. Take any number of events in the life of a man, distribute them as you see fit and you will be left with a character who is incontestably real. Distribute them in a slightly different way and – damn it! – the character changes, it’s a different person, though equally real. All I can tell you is that I will devote the same care to my story of Alejandro Bevilacqua’s life as I would wish a narrator to devote to my own story, when the time comes.

I realize that we’re not talking about a self-portrait here. It isn’t Alberto Manguel who interests you. A brief excursion into that tributary will be necessary,

however, if we are going to navigate the principal river with confidence. I promise not to drag the depths of my own river, or to linger on its banks. But I need to explain some shared experiences and in order to do that, a few asides are necessary.

On one of the occasions you interviewed me, Terradillos, I believe that I told you how it was that I came to live in Madrid, in the mid-1970s, taking two small rooms at the top of the Calle del Prado. I had an American scholarship and enjoyed the sort of robust health one cannot count on after thirty. I spent nearly a year and a half there, believe it or not, before events forced me to flee, and to take refuge here, in Poitiers. At the time, you asked me why I had chosen Poitiers. I’ll answer you now: it was because I had to leave Madrid, a city that had been infected, for me, by the ghost of Alejandro Bevilacqua. Everything has changed since that time, and these days the city is full of music and light. But on the few occasions that I have returned, even when

sitting at a café on the Paseo de la Castellana or the Plaza de la Ópera, I have felt his presence beside me, his fingers on my arm, the smell of tobacco in my nostrils, the cadence of his voice in my ears. I do not know if Madrid is particularly given to such bewitchments. You and I know that nothing like that happens in Poitiers.

It's strange, but sometimes I cannot be absolutely sure whether a certain memory is mine or his. Here's an example: Bevilacqua spoke fondly of the house in Belgrano, where he had lived with his paternal grandmother. I also lived in that neighbourhood, with its austere houses and streets lined with Jacaranda trees, about seven or eight years after Bevilacqua had moved to the centre. Now I no longer know if the house I half-remember is mine, or the one described to me by Bevilacqua, with its coloured glass door panels, its narrow stairways, the velvet curtain separating the dining area from the sitting room, the chandelier reflected in the

mahogany table, the bookcase with its blue volumes of *A Children's Treasury*, the porcelain figures of the Meissen monkey orchestra, all in powdered wigs, playing a silent concert. It may even be an invented house, based on memories that are partly his and partly mine, but now I shall never know, because the neighbourhood has been torn down to make room for skyscrapers. It would have mattered to Bevilacqua, who was precise even about the detail of his dreams. It doesn't matter to me.

Bevilacqua believed that he had inherited this obsession with details from his grandmother, a severe and demanding woman – here in Europe they would say she was not so much Catholic as Lutheran. Throughout Alejandro's infancy, his grandmother had reminded him that God is always watching us, day and night, with an unblinking eye, and that every gesture, every thought, is registered in his Great Book of Accounts, like the one that lay on the desk in the delicatessen. Ever faithful to her convictions,

Señora Bevilacqua ran her business with exemplary rigour and hygiene, never allowing herself to be seduced by the new wave of supermarkets, with their plastic shelving and neon lights, which were replacing shops like hers. La Bergamota, until well into the 1970s, was the pride of Belgrano.

She was equally rigorous with her grandson. Privations, prohibitions and lashings with a carpet-beater were alternated with rewards and affection. On one occasion, some adolescent nonsense got him locked in his room for three long days, with nothing more than bread and water for sustenance. Bevilacqua assured me that this was not poetic hyperbole: he literally got a slice of bread three times a day and a jug of tap water. There was something medieval about Señora Bevilacqua, something of the embittered, unyielding dowager, with an element too of the overseer, the manager.

And yet, in spite of Señora Bevilacqua's stated desire that her grandson follow the family tradition,

he never felt that his destiny lay among sausages and cheese. After school, before entering that shop, fragrant with brine, where he helped his grandmother to fish ladles full of olives out of the oak barrels, or to turn the handle on the ham-slicing machine, Bevilacqua used to stop in front of the bookshop (at least that's what I imagine) where the yellow volumes of the complete *Robin Hood* were displayed in the window, and dream of far-away countries and extraordinary encounters. He imagined himself a Sandokan or a Phileas Fogg, but those distant lands were no further than the Tigre Delta, just outside Buenos Aires, and his Indian princess was the pharmacist's daughter. Later he realized that he was drawn not so much by the lure of journeys and adventures, but simply by things that appear out of reach.

When did I first see him? In Madrid, in February or March of 1976, at the offices of Quita, our Celestina and our nemesis.

Blanca, Blanquita, Blanquita Grenfeld, Larralde de Grenfeld. Always elegant, always bright, always on the crest of the *nouvelle vague*. Do you not know who I'm talking about? Oh, Terradillos! Fame works in mysterious ways! In Argentina, before the dictatorship, Blanquita Grenfeld was the one who decided everything in the world of culture. She was the younger daughter of the Larraldes, great landowners who lost everything in a failed enterprise to raise yaks – or was it camels? – on the pampas. As dark as a mulata, she was married in adolescence to some German industrialist – who was tactful enough to die shortly afterwards – enjoying thereafter a widowhood that liberated her simultaneously from a groping father and a dim-witted husband. Blanca Larralde de Grenfeld used the name of her incestuous father and the fortune of the deceased industrialist to establish her own republic of Arts and Literature. In Buenos Aires, no painting was hung, no book published, no film shown or play

put on without her say-so. Everyone, from the most bureaucratic official, to the most anarchic artist knew her as “Quita”. She had a finger in every pie. She was also one of the first to leave. “Let’s go and make culture in the motherland,” Quita said, when the military began to close down premises and raid theatres and galleries.

A few weeks after moving to Madrid, Quita founded the Casa Martín Fierro, on a fourth floor in the Prospe district, among bungalows and workers’ houses. There, like some refined materfamilias, she played host to the fugitives, the redeemed, dispossessed, damaged, the lost and found that the various dictatorships of Latin America had not yet contrived (and please forgive this transitive verb) to “disappear”. She looked exquisite in her suit and pearls, a leopard-skin coat thrown over her shoulders by way of a cape, an aristocratic down on her upper lip and her eyes always lively behind their big tortoiseshell glasses. She had the right words

for everyone, without that undertow of contempt that so often accompanies philanthropy. Behind the desk in the reception area, a brand new bookcase displayed a copy of the immortal Hernández's work, *Martín Fierro*, various books that had been banned by the military regime and a couple of maté gourds which Andrea, Quita's loyal assistant, had learned to offer the guests. From that time on, no refugee arrived in Spain without stopping off to present their credentials at Quita's place.

The telephone rang one morning when I was thinking of calling in one of those long debts of sleep that are the privilege of youth. It was Quita.

"Come over immediately."

Without opening my eyes, I asked where to.

"To the *Martín Fierro*, of course."

I said that I didn't understand. Quita heaved an impatient sigh. There was a newly arrived group of Argentines who needed our help. That "we", for reasons I did not fully understand, included me.

And I admit that it flattered me. Quita was calling on me. Ergo, I existed.

She explained to me that one of the refugees appeared to be a writer.

"A novelist," she added. "The surname's Bevilacqua. He's very good looking. Do you know him?"

I said that I did not. The truth was that, since I had left Buenos Aires, I wasn't very up to date with Argentine writing. With youthful arrogance I judged that, if this Bevilacqua had published something in the last two or three years, his books must obviously be either official propaganda or pseudo-romantic pap.

"We're due a renaissance," I added, but Quita had already hung up.

When I arrived at the *Martín Fierro*, Bevilacqua was installed in a tiny chair, but with all the dignity of a man on a throne. When he saw me, he got to his feet.

He was the saddest person I had ever seen. The others who were with him, two or three new arrivals, looked at me like dogs in a pound; by comparison,

they seemed merely tired. That melancholy that afflicts most *porteños* manifested itself physically in Bevilacqua's whole body. He was someone who suffered – that was obvious – but in so visceral and profound a way that it was impossible for him to contain that sadness: it darkened his appearance, stooped his shoulders, softened his features. It withered him to such a degree that it was difficult to gauge how old he was. If one tried to touch him, he shrank away. Through goodness knows which diplomatic stratagems, he had been retrieved from prison only two days earlier, then put on a plane with minimal luggage.

As though to justify my presence, Quita explained that I was a writer and a compatriot. For the sake of saying something, I mumbled something about what books he had published. For the first time, Bevilacqua smiled.

“No, brother,” he answered. “It's not books I write. I used to make photonovels for a living.”

Perhaps I should explain, Terradillos, what these photonovels are, because I'm guessing that this form of literature is not cultivated in France. Back in the 1930s some long forgotten genius thought to combine the attractions of movies, comic strips and romantic novels, thereby inventing a new hybrid genre between dialogue and photography. Actors were positioned as required, photographed at different angles and then speech bubbles containing the relevant dialogue were super-imposed on the photographs. Bevilacqua penned the contents of those bubbles.

Quita was not to be defeated.

“That also counts as art,” she said later, when we were alone. “Don't tell me that we're only going to help people who write high literature. My conditions of acceptance are the same as those of the Real Academía: it's sufficient for him to know that there's no “h” in España. Manguel, don't be a shit. This man needs our help.”

“Favouritism,” some onlooker observed as, after wishing Bevilacqua luck and giving him my address, I said goodbye with a hug. “It’s the same everywhere.”

Two days later, in the middle of the afternoon, Bevilacqua appeared at my house, freezing cold. Thus began the first of many such afternoons.

Of course you probably want to know all the details of Bevilacqua’s early life: the ins and outs of his primary education, his sexual initiation, his first steps in political activism; his imprisonment and torture. And again I must say that I am not the best person to answer these questions. Discretion, if not indifference, was our watchword during those months that we used to see each other. I know what you’re thinking: he talked and I resigned myself to listening and you imagine that, out of that farrago, I must have salvaged some dramatic scene, some vital episode. It wasn’t really like that. Bevilacqua would talk about his life in an erratic way, filling

an improvised ashtray with yellow cigarette butts, with no concern for the historical or chronological coherence of his tale. This was no *Bildungsroman* he was spinning me, but something more akin to a story from one of his photonovels – predictable, melodramatic and doomed.

Let us take, as an example, that Buenos Aires which he remembered through a haze of nostalgia. Bevilacqua could not believe that I didn’t miss the city which, I believe, is better in memories than in real life. Bevilacqua, in contrast, not only missed the capital in which he had lived; he missed the very map of Argentina. I mean, he missed the forests, the mountains, the great expanses of plains which he must have seen only once or twice – if that – from a train. I, in contrast, was drawn to ever smaller spaces: in place of the countryside, a market square; in place of the city, a village. Madrid and Poitiers, as you well know, are villages with a metropolitan vocation. Bevilacqua suffered from what you French

call *mal du pays* – but I think he still would have had it, even if it had been possible for him to return. He was missing a moment that had passed, not a place, a geography of lost hours in streets that no longer existed, where he had lingered in the doorways of houses long since demolished, or in cafés which had some time ago, exchanged their *boiserie* and marble for glittery finishes and formica. Believe me, I understood his nostalgia – I just didn’t share it.

For me, Buenos Aires was a city in which I had scarcely lived and which – even during the years that I knew it – had entered a decline. Bevilacqua, however, had fallen in love with the city when she was still a *grande dame*, resplendent in silk and high heels, perfumed and bejewelled with a dab of rouge, elegant without ostentation and ingenious without bombast. But in the last few decades (this was how Bevilacqua explained recent Argentine history) a shameful illness had defiled her. She had lost her grace, her eloquence. Her new avenues and

skyscrapers seemed a false addition, like artificial limbs. Her gardens were withering; a dense fog descended on her, one that was barely penetrated by the intermittent glow of orangey lamplight. By comparison with this down-at-heel Buenos Aires, the city of his childhood seemed a thousand times more beautiful and resplendent.

From very early on, when he first became aware of a certain subcutaneous itch and of a certain weight in the groin, he knew that what he felt for Buenos Aires was similar to an erotic attraction. To touch the rough stone facades, the cold railings; to smell the jasmine in September and the damp pavements in March (I was also in Arcadia!) excited him physically. Walking down the street where he lived or sitting on the rubber seats in the buses made him pant and sweat.

“*Souvenir, souvenir, que me veux-tu*” as someone once said. I’ve remembered something that may satisfy your scurrilous, journalistic curiosity.

Bevilacqua first fell in love on the day of his twelfth birthday. A classmate named Babar, oddly (which is why I've never forgotten him), had told him about a cinema a few blocks away from the Retiro station, wedged into the wall which separated the tracks from the Paseo Colón. The woman in the box office didn't ask if the boy with the unconvincingly deep voice was indeed eighteen, as stipulated on the notice at the entrance. With his blood pounding in his ears, Bevilacqua penetrated the gloom and groped his way towards a seat. The cinema, by the way, smelled of sweat and ammonia.

Bevilacqua could never remember (if indeed he ever knew it) the name of the film: he thought that it was German or Swedish, and he never saw it again. The storyline, so he told me, sparing no details, had something to do with a country girl who went off to the city to seek her fortune. This innocent child had a heart-shaped face and wore a tight, white dress which, in the film's raunchiest scene, she tore

off and flung onto a chair. Bevilacqua watched on, mesmerized, as her face filled the screen and a boy (because of course there was a boy) kissed her. With disgusting sentimentality, Bevilacqua told me that he had felt as though the lips kissing her were his own.

Discreet black-out. The following scene showed dawn breaking over the tiled rooftops. Naked, but for a pair of underpants, the boy jumped out of bed and started to fry a couple of eggs. The girl asked him sleepily if it wasn't too early to eat eggs. Bevilacqua, for whom breakfast, in the Argentine style, comprised only coffee and toast, never forgot the answer: "I eat what I want, when I want it." "It was then," he told me, "that I understood what that freedom was that I had dreamed about in my grandmother's shop. Freedom was fried eggs at dawn."

I don't know if the poor man really believed in the relevance of this silly observation, or if he made it

simply to relive that adventure – but it’s certainly true that Bevilacqua spent a large part of his adolescence wanting to do unusual things in unexpected places. For survival’s sake, Bevilacqua meekly filled the roles required of him by convention – loyal grandson, disciplined student, restless adolescent – at the same time regarding himself as a youth far wiser than any adult authority, braver than any adventurer and so bursting with passionate love that his imagination latched onto worldly knowledge like those sticky spider threads which are known in Argentina as “the devil’s drool”.

The heart-shaped face of that anonymous actress pervaded his dreams. I think that he must have superimposed her face onto every other woman’s, even years after that first encounter. In his tedious descriptions, her characteristics changed often depending on the context, so that sometimes the hair was black and silky, like Loredana’s; sometimes the eyes were smaller and shining, like Graciela’s;

sometimes the whole face became translucent and hazy, as though it belonged to some woman in his memory who had almost evanesced. He searched for that face throughout his adolescence. Once he thought he spotted it in one of those mildly pornographic magazines, *Rico Tipo*, or *Tutti Frutti*, which tend to pile up in men’s barbers. After that, he started looking for her among the newspaper sellers of the Puente Saavedra, beneath the columns of the Panamerican Highway. He never found her again.

You’ll be wondering how I manage (in spite of reservations) to reproduce these conversations. I confess that during my time in Madrid, when I was not yet fat and my beard not yet white, it did cross my mind to write a novel. The thought of adding my own volume to the universal library was a sinful temptation – as it would be for any other person with a love of books. I had in mind a character, a creator, an artist, whose whole life would founder

because of one lie. The novel would be set in Buenos Aires and – since I trust my memory more than my imagination – I told myself that these confidences of Bevilacqua’s would come in useful for the creation of my fictional character. Very soon, however, I realized that Bevilacqua’s memories lacked passion and colour and, almost without thinking about it, I began to add to his stories a little fantasy and humour.

As I’ve said before, Bevilacqua was a stickler for details, which, as you know very well, is a way of avoiding emotion. He went to town on superficialities, so as not to reveal secrets. Between one cigarette and the next, he would get to his feet to show me how the personalities involved had behaved, employing his saffron-coloured fingers in reenactments of their gestures; he imitated their voices and provided me with lists of names, dates, places. Such was his obsession with exactitude and his horror of getting things wrong that Bevilacqua

often gave the impression of inventing this past, as though to convince me of its existence.

I don’t know if I’m making myself clear, my friend. Nobody has a crystal-clear recall of events that happened years ago, unless he has had them photographed and archived for the purpose of reproducing them later. Apparently Balzac did that: he created faces for his characters, tried them out in front of the mirror, then sat down to describe them. It was the same for Bevilacqua. His descriptions of the people in his past were so sharp that I felt I had seen with my own eyes (for example) the little Lennon glasses that Babar wore, his military waistcoats and his contagious laugh. When Bevilacqua was on a roll, I kept quiet, not wanting to encourage him. But after he had gone, I was left with the feeling of having taken part in some sort of retrospective performance.

Bevilacqua admired people for whom reality was based on solid facts and figures, on documents. He

did not believe in invention. He had discovered this mistrust in appearances very early on. I can put a date on it for you: it was a Sunday in September, after the obligatory Mass. Walking along behind his grandmother, Bevilacqua saw a scruffy old man standing beneath a Jacaranda tree on the street corner. In his sermon on charity, the priest had described the archetypal beggar to whom Saint Martin de Tours gave half his cloak on a winter afternoon; this old man's bushy moustache and threadbare sleeves corresponded to the description of the beggar in the sermon. Bevilacqua saw this apparition as proof of the power of reality, which had come to give substance to the priest's words. His response to that power was to take out a few coins from his pocket, which he placed in the dried up hand. The old man looked at the coins, looked at his benefactor and burst out laughing. Bevilacqua mumbled an explanation. Still laughing, the old man apologized, thanked him for the gesture and returned the coins.

For a few days afterwards, Bevilacqua looked for the old man from the street corner. Then, one afternoon, returning from school, he saw him, standing immobile, as before, beneath the same tree. The old man motioned for him to come forward. Bevilacqua approached him, feeling a little nervous. Now that he saw him again, he was none too sure what to say. It was the old man who spoke first.

“You're wondering what I'm doing standing here on my own, looking a mess, if I'm not a beggar, right? You imagine that beggars look like this. You see me, you say to yourself, “That's a beggar.” But you shouldn't trust in appearances, boy. Do you like puppets?”

Bevilacqua had seen a puppet show only once in his life, at a boring birthday party. Curiosity and surprise prompted him to say that he did.

“Follow me,” said the beggar-who-wasn't and, taking the boy by his arm, he lead him towards

the Barrancas district. They stopped in front of a decrepit-looking house with large, low windows.

I'll paint the scene for you.

Bevilacqua had recently entered adolescence. Far from mistrusting the human libido, the interest which he was capable of provoking in adults intrigued him. That second glance in the bus; that silent sizing-up, seeking signs of mutual interest in the street; that knee, moving closer in the darkness of a cinema – Bevilacqua took them as a compliment, as welcoming gestures on the threshold of adulthood. I'm not saying that the old man was perverted, nor that Bevilacqua was drawn towards those pleasures so well described in Greek literature. But something that he had not noticed previously now removed his fear, prompting him to carry on, to go with the old man and slip into the rooms of an unknown house.

“Slip” is perhaps not the right word, since it suggests a progress which meets no resistance. The rooms of this house were obstacles in themselves.

Each one was stuffed with all kinds of objects: wardrobes, shelves crammed with books, armchairs, tables and bedside tables, statues that looked as though they were made of stone and turned out to be papier-mâché, piles of newspapers tied together with twine, laundry baskets, unidentifiable packages and on top of every object, protruding from every conceivable gap, there were puppets in every style and size. Arms, legs, daubed faces with glass eyes and colourful wigs peeped coyly out from behind the furniture or sprawled obscenely on the boxes, collectively evoking an orgy or a battlefield. For a few seconds, Bevilacqua had the impression of having entered into an ogre's cave, filled with the corpses of dwarves.

The old man picked up a Roman soldier from a threadbare chair and offered this seat to Bevilacqua, then sat down opposite him, on a great painted chest. Evidently this old man (whose name, by the way, was Spengler) then launched himself on a long

and seductive paean to the art of puppetry, in which creatures made of wood and felt enacted before an audience a more certain reality than that of our own illusory world. Spengler said that he took his theatre to schools and parks, factories and prisons with the aim of telling what he called “truthful lies”. “I am a missionary from the world of story-telling,” he told Bevilacqua. And giving the boy a little slap on the thigh (Bevilacqua would have judged it innocent but I’m not so sure), he began pulling on different strings, leaping over the furniture and making mysterious noises.

As you can imagine, Bevilacqua was fascinated by all those minuscule arms and bodies, noses and eyes. At twelve or thirteen, we do not want anything to be strange, and yet strange things hold an irresistible attraction for us. They are appealing and terrifying at the same time. Bevilacqua was torn between going and staying. Just then, a girl – a woman, almost – came into the room and sat

down at one of those cluttered tables to mend some puppets. Later Bevilacqua learned that her name was Loredana.

Bevilacqua began to visit Don Spengler at all times of the day: as the years passed, he never lost that disagreeable habit of thinking that other people should tailor their day around his. He went to see him before school or in the evening, when Señora Bevilacqua was busy at La Bergamota. I imagine that the old man must have felt flattered: Bevilacqua was already blessed, it seems, with that seductive expression bestowed on him by hooded eyes, pronounced eyebrows and black irises. Spengler was not, however, the one he came to see, much though he had grown fond of the mustachioed old man. He came looking for Loredana, who barely even spoke to him as she bent over her mending, in a low-cut top, crossing her legs in such a way that revealed one thigh, as shiny as an apple. He would find Spengler sleeping in an armchair with a book, or making his

marionettes dance frenetically on an improvised dais, or staring out of the window, lost in thought, or painting, with brisk brushstrokes, a face or some scenery. Don Spengler seemed to move from an almost catatonic state to one of febrile activity, with no intermediate stages, and Bevilacqua used to make bets with himself about how he would find the old man on a given afternoon or morning.

Loredana was not always at home, but the mere fact of knowing that she had been there a few hours earlier or that she would be coming later – when he would already have gone – filled Bevilacqua with a feeling that was at once anguished and entralling. When he did see her, he felt that Loredana handled the soldiers and princesses with the skill of a goddess. In the mouth of Bevilacqua, that word was no mere hyperbole.

Now, if it had been up to me to invent a life for Bevilacqua, I would have gone about it differently. Knowing how he was when he arrived in Spain,

knowing, above all, about his tragic end and the terrible events that drove him to it, I would have furnished him with a more passionate childhood: skirmishes with the underworld, affairs with older women, some petty criminality which would later, towards the end of his adolescence, evolve into revolutionary action. Because, the way he himself told it, violence, frenzied love, politics (the kind which took him to prison) played no more than chance roles in his life, accidents of fate. Bevilacqua was cut out for observation, contemplation, like that traveller of Baudelaire's who cares about nobody – neither family nor friends – but only for clouds: *les merveilleux nuages*.

It's my belief, Terradillos, that this contemplative vocation spawned his talent as a storyteller, for detailing trivialities with a pornographer's gusto. For example, Spengler basically only mattered as a preamble to Loredana, yet Bevilacqua claimed to remember his entire life history.

It seems the old man had been born in Stuttgart, not far from the home of the philosopher Hegel (who had even exchanged greetings with his grandfather once or twice). The family's business was watchmaking and the regular ticking of clocks had inured them to the passage of time. Spengler's father was a devout but cantankerous Jew who spent his days ranting and raving about the iniquity of his God. He had devoted himself to clocks out of respect for the great mechanisms of Time, but without actually conceding them his approval. It struck him as scandalous that God should have invented one, continuous, eternal time while simultaneously apportioning to men short little spans in which – adding insult to injury – there was nothing but frustration and suffering. His wife, who was rotund and stupid, smiled all day and night while he, reddening with apoplexy, bent over his wheels and cogs. "A man must keep on working," he muttered, "even when his employer is a madman."

At the age of twelve, Spengler was apprenticed to a puppet-maker, and never saw his parents again. War hounded him to the edge of the Atlantic. There his master, finding himself too exhausted to attempt the journey to the New World, gave him the trunk full of puppets together with a little money from his savings, and saw him off on a boat full of Syrians who did not know very well where they were going. That was how he arrived in Buenos Aires, one autumn afternoon, thousands of years ago. He wanted Bevilacqua to know about his background, so as to understand that all human lives are, in the end, the same. "Directionless, difficult, incomprehensible", he told the boy, gently slapping his leg. "But the same."

I am, on principle, totally against giving psychological explanations, but – if you want my opinion – I do believe Bevilacqua felt that Spengler's presence settled, in some way, the debt incurred by the death of his own parents. He decided to devote his

life to puppets. He would learn the necessary skills from the old man, and he would be with Loredana. Señora Bevilacqua (who was beginning to lose all notion of time and to forget people's names and faces) was persuaded to smile on his increasingly long sessions at Spengler's place. Finally came the memorable day when the old man allowed him to work one of the puppets in public. Even years later, Bevilacqua could still sing to himself the music that was played when the curtain went up.

Let's talk about Loredana. How often had he seen her? Half a dozen times at Spengler's, perhaps a few more in the street and at the little theatre. From those snippets, he had assembled an entire, physical person. The English talk about "falling in love"; Bevilacqua would never have used such an expression. For Bevilacqua to become enamoured of someone was no accident, no happenstance; to love was to be converted, to acquire a new state. You did not fall in it, you let it fall over you, like rain, soaking you

to the marrow. I don't know if Loredana realized; I suppose she did – women know about these things. Loredana never gave him any encouragement. She was impeccably polite, allowing him to walk her to the bus stop, or to give her a box of polished fruit or a tin of La Gioconda membrillo stolen from his grandmother's shop – but she never confided in him or cracked a joke. Bevilacqua learned nothing of her life beyond Spengler's workshop, on the other side of the curtain, except that Spengler had trained her himself and that her surname was Finnish.

A little before the Christmas of 1956, Don Spengler was invited by a producer of variety shows to put on a performance in Santiago de Chile. Loredana, of course, would go with him. Bevilacqua fell into a despair. I don't think he had told anyone about his current state of mind. He could never have confided such a thing to Señora Bevilacqua and – as far as I know – he had only one real friend at school. All reality was reduced now to this one single fact and

its consequences: Loredana was going. He would be left alone. He could not live without her. He decided to follow her.

You can imagine my surprise when he told me about this adolescent escapade. Nobody – certainly not I – would have thought of Bevilacqua as an impulsive person, a man of action. We used to talk (or rather he talked while I, as usual, looked at my watch) about sudden and rash acts, the kind that everyone associates with a Latin temperament. Bevilacqua praised them. Not for him the cool, premeditated decision, but rather the one that strikes suddenly, like lightning. I think I told you before that I thought of Bevilacqua as very much a northern Italian – very rational. Perhaps he hoped that by telling me about his adventure, he would show me that he was not like that at all.

The greatest difficulty was crossing the border with Chile. He knew that his identity card would be sufficient, but equally he knew that, as a minor,

he would need his grandmother's authorization – and that she would never give it. The solution was to get hold of an older person's documentation. Reasoning that identification photographs are rarely recognizable, he persuaded Babar to purloin his older brother's card – with the argument that he wanted to get into some particularly smutty cabaret club – and lend it to him for a few days. To get money, he sold his Grundig tape recorder to a neighbour's daughter. He bought a train ticket, packed a few scant belongings and left a note for Señora Bevilacqua very early one morning, in which he explained that he wanted to go out into the world and make his fortune, on his own and without asking anyone's help. He hinted that his adventure might take him to Patagonia which, for Señora Bevilacqua, had a reputation as fearsome as the Amazon jungle.

I don't know if you agree with me, Terradillos, but there is something magical about train journeys.

Boarding a train at the start of a new life (or what Bevilacqua felt to be a new life) must have felt like an epic moment for the boy. He noticed every detail, as if they were already passing into history: the cherry-coloured upholstery, the long-haired guard, a group of boys playing guitar. Everything was important because each moment (so Bevilacqua told himself) was now part of his future.

Throughout one interminable day, he journeyed across a monotonous landscape; to Bevilacqua it seemed the necessary preparation for a great victory. When the mountains appeared, they confirmed his expectations. Before night fell, the train arrived at a little border station, tucked between stone walls and dirty snow. While they waited for the engine to be changed, Bevilacqua and the other passengers got out to stretch their legs on the platform which was half Argentinian, half Chilean. The oriental-looking official cast an indifferent glance at Bevilacqua's apocryphal document. Years later, Bevilacqua

would comment, like one who has only recently realized it: "I have walked on the Andes." The rest of the journey took place in darkness.

When he arrived in Santiago, it was after midnight. He must have fallen asleep because, when he got down from the train, the other passengers had vanished. The station was deserted and an old man was sweeping the platforms. As he emerged onto the street, he saw the gates being locked.

He had heard Don Spengler mention the name of the theatre where they were going to perform and asked a taxi driver if it was far away. He set off walking. It was dark, of course, but finally he picked out the lights of the Gran Hotel O'Higgins, on the other side of the road. He went in and asked the receptionist if this was where Don Spengler and his troupe were staying. The receptionist said that it was. Bevilacqua asked to be put through to Loredana's room.

You know, when Bevilacqua claimed not to be a writer, there was some truth in that. He lacked the

inventive spark necessary for fiction, that lack of respect for what is and that excitement about what could be. He didn't imagine: he saw and documented things, which is not the same. Proust goes looking for details a posteriori, because he wants the past to confirm what he is inventing in the present. Not so Bevilacqua: he was interested in the a priori, in facts as pure narration, with no gloss, no commentary.

I don't know what he was expecting. That his beloved would cry out with joy, run downstairs and hurl herself into the arms of her intrepid Hannibal? That she would invite him into her bed, share the night with him as recompense for his bravery? I know that the last thing he expected was absolute silence. He heard the receiver being picked up, some sleepy breathing; he heard the echo of his own voice saying "Loredana, it's me, Alejandro"; he heard the receiver being put down. Still holding the handset, he asked the receptionist if there was a free room for the night. As the man got him a key, Bevilacqua

heard himself observe that it was the first time he had ever stayed in a hotel.

That unbearable night finally reached its end. Bevilacqua could not remember having slept, but when he saw that it was light outside, he got up and went downstairs. Don Spengler was in the dining room, having breakfast on his own. Loredana had woken him and told him about what had happened. She had also told him to send Bevilacqua back to Buenos Aires that same morning. Bevilacqua refused. He had left everything to be with her. He would follow her wherever she went. He would love her in silence, from the shadows. He couldn't go back.

Don Spengler tried to persuade him. He repeated his lecture on reality and our obligation to accept it. But for Bevilacqua, the fiction, the lie, was Loredana's absence; the truth consisted in her accepting his presence, his act of love, his very self.

At that moment, Loredana entered the dining room. It took him a minute to recognize her. This

Chile Loredana was different. The one from his memory, his yearning, was taller, darker, marked by absence and desire. In every waking hour, every sleeping minute, he had felt Loredana's physical presence, from the brush of her hair against his arm to the scent of apples exuded by her skin under her clothes. This woman who came into the dining room was different: somewhat round-shouldered, haggard, rather graceless in her movements. As though to confirm her presence, Bevilacqua tried to grasp her arm. Loredana dodged him and was about to sit down when Bevilacqua once more put his hand out towards her. Loredana slapped him. Then Don Spengler got to his feet and ordered the girl to go to her room. Her suitor's nose was bleeding. Don Spengler passed him a napkin to wipe it. Bevilacqua turned to catch a final glimpse of her, but Loredana had already gone.

That very afternoon he returned to Buenos Aires, this time by plane, courtesy of Don Spengler. At the

border, an official pored over his document, but let him through without saying anything. I don't know what explanation he may have given his grandmother. Years later, Bevilacqua still wished he could ask Loredana why she had not spoken to him. It was something that he never came to understand.

Bevilacqua told me that his grandmother did not ask him where he had been. He never knew for sure if she had read his note, or if she had made a decision to ignore this thing that would certainly have been hard for her to understand. What was true was that, from that moment onwards, Señora Bevilacqua scarcely paid him any attention. Perhaps, in some way, after all the years of bickering and punishments, she had realized that force and discipline were of little avail where her grandson was concerned, and she decided to take a kind of *laissez-faire* approach – that is, to let him live his life. It began to seem more important to Señora Bevilacqua (less bewildering you might say), not to

leave two knives crossed on a table, for this presaged a conflict, than to ask her grandson for a truthful account of his life out in the big world.

In the only photograph that Alejandro possessed of his grandmother (and which, of course, he showed to me) Señora Clara Bevilacqua was pictured in black and white, a thin, pale woman, her eyebrows plucked and drawn in, as though with a violet pencil, her hair arranged in tight curls, as rigid as a jockey's helmet. Wearing a flowery dress, and posed against a chalk wall, she bore an expression of unremitting hardship. She was tall, upright and severe, a woman who was clearly uncomfortable with physical contact and didn't go in for hugs and kisses. Throughout his childhood, Bevilacqua felt that he must have failed some secret test. He never knew which, but this mystery and his sense of failure made him feel guilty nonetheless. So Bevilacqua's adolescence transpired between that ancient and haughty woman and the evanescent Loredana.

I must confess to a certain impatience with Bevilacqua's *angst*. All my life, my parents had averred that every single thing I did was the work of a genius, and that my faults were the mere peccadilloes of a saint. Señora Bevilacqua held the opposite view: that any task upon which her grandson embarked must, from the outset, be destined for failure. She did not know it, but this woman – in common with my parents – was in the grip of superstitions that predate the cultures of the Po or the Caucasus. For my parents, these simply constituted the rules of the game whereas, for Bevilacqua's grandmother, they were traps set by an imperious and vengeful god, traps that her hapless grandson would not know how to avoid. Poor Bevilacqua; I think that he was unloved by his grandmother.

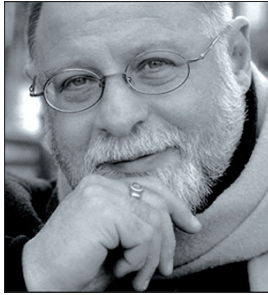
One thing was for sure: when the boy returned from Chile, the world had changed, for his Loredana was no longer in it. Then he decided to change his habits, his daily routine, as though to take revenge,

through his own conduct, on the conduct of that thing he dared not call fate. His grandmother's life was divided between her home, the church and the shop. Bevilacqua wanted to escape from all three of them. He began to find excuses to linger after school, or to leave the house earlier than usual. Every day he took a different route to school and he would lose himself in the tree-lined streets of the poorer neighbourhoods, in ancient parks, or among building developments whose purpose he could not guess at. In those days, Buenos Aires was a good city to get lost in. Hours went by like this, and then weeks, months. It is strange how one afternoon can prolong itself to infinity, and several years be reduced to five words.

But I don't know if all this interests you, Terradillos. I don't know if what I'm saying is grist to your mill. You want to know why Alejandro Bevilacqua died. You want to know how a polite and reasonable man in his forties, at the moment

when fortune was beginning to smile on him, came to grief against the pavement of the Calle del Prado, in the early hours of a Sunday in January, beneath my balcony.

I'm getting round to it, my friend. Be patient.



BORN IN BUENOS AIRES IN 1948, ALBERTO MANGUEL is a Canadian writer, translator and editor. He is the author of numerous non-fiction books such as *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (co-written with Gianni Guadalupi in 1980), *A History of Reading* (1996), *The Library at Night* (2007) and *Homer's Iliad and Odyssey: A Biography* (2008), and novels such as *News from a Foreign Country Came* (1991), for which he won the McKitterick Prize.

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