

DUE OBEDIENCE - FIRES

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Chapter 1 The First Fire

"In a few minutes we will land at the Ezeiza International Airport. Please fasten your seat belts and extinguish your cigarettes," we are informed by the synthesized voice of the stewardess who has entertained our digestive systems, fears and sexual fantasies for 12 hours at 33,000 feet above mountains of ice, snowy cities, warm celestial seas, misty swamps, boiling jungles, ecuatorial storms, fires and wars, births and deaths, from the north to the south, entering and leaving the four seasons. He is just another passenger on the Pan Am New York-to-Buenos Aires flight. I am the fire that accompanies him on his first, and perhaps definitive, return to his birthplace, that great city at war which he had entered 33 years earlier, weighing 11 pounds, at a luxurious hospital near where the bonfires of San Juan still blazed.

The last time he had seen this airport he was departing on a Caravelle jet to Los Angeles. His identity card, carried in the inside pocket of his navy blue blazer, identified him as Guillermo Francisco Grisanti. His friends from the Military Academy who had come to see him off called him "Pirólatra" or "Piroma" * Grisanti; his parents called him "Memo", Guillermo or Guillermo Francisco, according to the circumstances. Shortly after he arrived in California he had tired of spelling it out and began to call himself Bill Gris. The U.S. passport that will be stamped within a few minutes by the immigration officials of his homeland identifies him as Thomas C. Quiller. The man who is waiting for him in Customs is holding a cardboard sign against his chest, printed in black with this last name. But in private the man who waits will refer to him as Martin, or more formally, as Martin Guerrero. These names might seem to be irrelevant details to confuse and complicate an already complex story. But they are not. Names themselves, like words, usually take on a life of their own. They seize the person, and at times, possess him. They suck the life out and leave him dry, like a dead insect lying in the sun. I have known people who drag names through streets and tunnels like deranged, homeless and dirty beggars who accumulate bags, old newspapers, bottles, and dirty clothes, piling them up in some lost shopping cart. Names are like the variables in a potential equation of multiple coefficients placed before false, changing or partially unknown factors that can be discovered only by fixing the value of the unknown. So, because it is certain that names can complicate things, we will call him simply X.

Today he is feeling more nervous than when he left the city of his birth. He is reflecting that to go towards something indefinably new, like when he emigrated to California, is less complicated than to return to what continues to be vaguely known, even though punished by

* Firelover or Fireworshiper.

time, disguised as an ogre or a cinderella, wrapped in nostalgia and resentments. He is returning to what he too seriously refers to as *his country, his roots, his people in struggle, his land in flames.*

Men are animals of slow digestion (more like a cow than a hummingbird, or more like a snake than a bee). Usually a decade or more passes between the satisfaction of the first mouthful and the final relief of the evacuation or discharge of certain comestibles — or comedies — like those in this tale. This explains a little the preoccupation with time; this, and the assignment of nonrenewable quotas. Therefore, it is necessary to be explicit about the times. I'm not trying to confuse anyone; to the contrary, I'm trying to clarify.

X emigrated at the beginning of the '60s, shortly after the assassination of Kennedy. The brand-new Boeing 727 in which he is flying is about to land, now, 12 years later — let us say 1975 — when the ignominious disarray of the Northamerican evacuation from Saigon is still as fresh as a bouquet of freshly-cut red roses; when men, almost all Soviet citizens, are already residing in space on a permanent basis; when old wars have been replaced by others equally necessary and absurd; and you, well, you will know what year he is living in as you read. All right? But remember that there are 5 or 6 geocentric spheres, from whose multiple perspective all of this is simultaneous.

X intuitis that what will happen in the next days and weeks will have important consequences for his life. He is thinking about struggles to come, new relationships and strong roots. He is thinking about tomorrows. But what he imagines has little to do with what will happen to him. This, his immediate future is a load which will take him several decades to digest. That is, if destiny gives him the chance; and if, after having lived it, he still has the will to ruminate, contemplate and process it all.

The somewhat irregular descent of the plane has made him conscious of a tight emptiness in his stomach. To calm his nerves, he thinks about all the changes which have occurred since his first take-off and the new landing. He feels radically different. He remembers his schoolmates saying good-bye in front of the guard house, they in white drill and he in dress uniform — anchors, wreaths and shields embroidered in gold on navy blue fabric, tight across his chest and shoulders. He remembers the hugs and the jokes, the repeated cat-calling of "*Dirty gringo! Yanqui Pirómano, you're going to Gringoland! Piróma, selling out your homeland! Piróma, give the Yanqui hell, give him hell!*" The slaps, hugs and insults of four years of military discipline had become expressions of a complicated intimacy disguised as comradeship. Years later, women and men, freed by miracle, would describe similar emotions as they denounced the tortures and the prisons. From that experience he had gained defenses and skills that would turn out to be useful later. He also left the Naval Academy with a certain ideology, something like that of a nationalist gorilla, a mixture of emotional repudiation and sensual admiration for discipline and authority. As he crossed the parade

grounds on that last day, he felt strong, burning, as if he had a glowing furnace inside, as if he were a tensed spring of tempered steel, ready to fire, attack or defend himself from things that were not yet definable. The 2nd Lieutenant Grisanti who had settled himself on the Caravelle en route to Los Angeles in 1963 could have become a militiaman, living as a civilian, but ready at any moment to serve the military apparatus when conditions required it — a reserve gorilla. On this day of his return to his homeland, X remembers that 2nd Lt. Grisanti dressed in dark gray trousers and a navy jacket, with regulation haircut, as an arrogant ass with oligarchial manners superimposed on his solid middle-class background. That's how X saw himself as Grisanti.

While the jet is making its final approach, X is remembering the changes over those ten years. First, the loss of the privileges, the violent plunge from his class — a free fall from the Buenos Aires petty bourgeoisie to the underclass of Latino immigrants who flooded the beautiful post-card city of San Francisco. Then came the disintegration of the psychic glue that had held together his national and class identity. Yes, he thinks about this from time to time. He looks at himself like the subject of a sociological study. This soothes him somewhat. It is a not-so-frequent effort to impose order so that he can think through an idea. Well, everybody works it out in their own way. He had learned to work to live, to swallow his arrogance counting his tips after a meal of leftovers among the dishwashers in the restaurant. He had studied and thought he had found love. He had learned to fight the huge redneck policemen with southern accents and to hate the war and its symbols — the Pentagon, Johnson, Nixon, Kissinger. He was crazy about the poet McCarthy and the idealistic McGovern and, anonymously, he had joined his adopted generation — the post-war "baby boom". He was convinced that he had definitively left behind his Buenos Aires infancy, like a lizard sheds his old, dry skin, leaving it to hang, dead, from a branch while the new reptile, happy in brand-new colors, goes off in search of more flying prisoners among other leaves in the great garden. Today X is convinced that during those years he has also exchanged the solitude of his small, close, and, according to him, miserly family for another one, more fertile, extended, and generous. Today he is still feeling proud of this exchange, as if it had a successful business transaction: his small being, beaten, wounded and sick from lack of consciousness, mistakes and uprooting, in exchange for the young, healthy, growing, and anonymous revolutionary family — like an old used car sneered at by the latest model, with a look that would kill. X thinks of himself as a man of the world, forged out of work, study and the political organization. He also thinks of himself as a modest veteran of that southern Asian war of liberation and resistance which was won, in part, inside the heart of the empire.

What he's feeling — strength mixed with pride, a light euphoria — is similar, chemically, to what excites the young man in the seat across the aisle — a kid from Ensenada with an athletic body and curly black hair, like the future Maradona, who is coming home after two years playing as left forward for the Brooklyn Soccer Club. But X is not aware of the similarity. And besides, he would reject it,

offended. The emotions of a revolutionary intellectual cannot be compared to those of an athlete!

The wheels touch ground, the turbines go into reverse gradually braking its rush forward. The jet turns to the left, beginning its long, slow procession towards the terminal. X thinks he feels a collective sigh of relief that precedes even the unbuckling of seatbelts, or the welcome, temperature, hour, and notices that usually end flights.

His review of the contrast between he who had left and he who is returning lifts his spirits and helps to calm the butterflies still fluttering in his stomach. Whatever method is good, if it helps give one control when the circumstances demand it.

"It helped you to catalog the past and the present, didn't it? Good. But try not to forget that not everything can be classified with such precision when it comes to people, above all when it comes to you. It would be fine for you to do what you have to do, if you are conscious that you still have a lot left of that arrogant young jackass which today you repudiate, even though you may have changed the political sign of your equation. Put this fact to the side for now if you want, but do not forget it in the least."

The passengers prepare to disembark: gathering sacks, packages, bags, stuffed animals; touching up make-up, combing hair, tucking shirts into pants, waking children, last-minute checking of schedules, stretching out stiff muscles. X remains seated and reviews once more the task that awaits him beginning the moment that he leaves the landing area and enters the airport, *a task that can cost you your life, kid, so get hold of yourself and keep it together.*

X does not remember when he first began his custom of running through his mind in the last moments before an examination, a long distance race, a soccer game, or a political discussion. What he does know is that these reviews had become a way of reaffirming the importance, the seriousness and the validity of whatever confronted him. It was a healthy habit of behavior, one that enabled him to concentrate his attention on the immediate, to sweep away the superfluous, to suspend the doubts so indispensable in the preparation but so incapacitating in the execution. Carrying out a basic review, going over the point of reference became a habit, a defense against a very deep-rooted tendency to perceive, at the most inopportune moments, how absurd certain situations were. Like the time that he had to interview Mariano Mores in San Francisco, just when he was arranging the recorder microphone in front of the composer of "Uno" and "Taquito Militar", he discovered that Mores had an impressive likeness to the flamboyant pianist Liberace, may he rest in peace. He became completely speechless. This being able to see absurdity hidden either outside or inside serious things was a remnant from remembered movies and readings (that were either identifiable or were perhaps from the collective memory of the genre). But not knowing the origins of the habit turns out to be less dangerous in the context of this clandestine business of multiple identities and strange

contraband.

"Martin, first I want to give you greetings from the leadership. They have been following your work in New York -- your international solidarity and propaganda work, your contacts at the U.N., everything. And I bring a response to your request to return to the country. The compañeros are clear that you need to return, to reimmerse yourself in our reality, to understand the party, the class, the combatants, the party schools, to reintegrate. And also we want to assign you a task."

These words, pronounced during an autumn walk among drunks, drug addicts and cops in New York City's Washington Square filled him with joy and moved him deeply. When he answered he stuttered, something he had not done since Alice, his neighbor -- 15 years old, but also three centuries older than he, whispered in his ear and asked him if he would be her boyfriend as they danced, pressing close to one another, to Paul Anka's "Put Your Head On My Shoulder." The words of the compañero, his contact, were like a prescription to cure his feeling of uprootedness, the key to a lost home, the point of departure for a heroic return.

"You received the organizational newspapers, didn't you? Well, you noticed the quality of the material -- 16 pages, three colors, good photos and graphics? Nice, no? (Whatever is not so nice, be that as it may, let's admit it.) The printing is clear, easy to read ... we are using the IBM typesetting equipment, you see. Like nearly all the press ... It is excellent gringo technology -- compact, light and it doesn't break down easily. The problem is that they use disposable carbon ribbons that cost a fortune and we can't get them. The censorship has forced dozens of newspapers into clandestinity. And the intelligence agents are watching all the distributors. About a month ago we were not careful and they got one of the compas. They broke him and he told them about two of our presses."*

By tracing a carton of disposable carbon ribbons through a path of torture and the rigorous search for the two presses, six comrades were killed and the indispensable revolutionary word was silenced for months. Without the ribbons, the IBM composer, the costly key element in the propaganda and dissemination apparatus, was made useless. Because of that conversation and reasoning, X is now in front of the dark opening through which the conveyor belt unloads packages onto the carousel, waiting for the luggage that contains enough IBM disposable ribbons to put out the newspaper and magazine for a least six months.

If someday (when the war is finished, won, lost or tied) someone, a journalist, a cellmate, a child, a young freedom fighter were to ask him, "And you, what did you do?" X would be able to answer frankly that he combatted the censorship, that he struggled for the truth. This was quite true, and honorable, but in his heart X would have preferred that his cargo was something different, something more impressive -- detonators, plastic explosives, infrared scopes, access plans to a military base rolled up in the grip of a tennis racquet. He would have preferred to be arriving at the capital, not on a scheduled Boeing 727 but on an obscure, camouflaged launch slipping through the night to the delta among the reeds, searching for hidden

* Short for compañero - comrade.

docks among the brush, for the blink of a lantern signalling the spot and the moment to unload the arms and ammunition which the insurgent workers were awaiting with anticipation and anxiety. But this was not so. Today it was only disposable IBM ribbons. *But this fantasy that I know he has, could not be permitted while he was waiting for the luggage. This was not the moment to start thinking about Bogart, Casablanca and the African Queen. No way. X was in his own movie awaiting two boxes and a suitcase in front of Customs in the Ezeiza International Airport.*

Instead of fantasizing, X was taking advantage of the wait to polish and complete his motivational review: In this popular guerrilla revolutionary war for national liberation, the word, communication, and contact with the people are as important as seizing an army post or bringing justice to a torturer. The dissemination organ informs and combats the disinformation of the regime; it organizes and unifies the potential to struggle, and perhaps most importantly, it advances the forging of a new consciousness among the people, helping to create the new man.

(How to underline the seriousness and validity of this reflection? How to insure that no inflection of an unmerited or unintentional joke should creep into these words? Because what is said, thought or written in the outmoded language of the organization manuals was and continues to be right even though today one may have to sing it at another tempo, with other words and new images. How to insure ourselves that, if one must laugh, that it be healthy laughter, the kind that might be accompanied by tears of tenderness, without mockery, cynicism or hate?)

Next to X, also waiting for their luggage, are the twins who sat with their mother on the other side of the left forward (the one who looked like the future Maradona.) They are playing "stone, paper and scissors." Facing each other they put their closed fists between their eyes. "Ready? One, two ..." And at the count of three they lower their fists, pointing toward each other's chests, either palm open for *paper*, or with index and middle finger forming the "V" for *scissors*, or fists closed for *stone*. Paper covers stone. Scissors cut paper, stone breaks scissors. *And fire? It conquers all. Ashes, lava, molten metal, untouchable red hot scissors stiff and dulled.* The black mouth vomits out first the valise, then the Panasonic stereo cardboard box, followed by the large box that at one time contained a Sony color TV. These two boxes, labelled with the name Thomas C. Quiller, now contain 600 genuine IBM typewriter ribbons, the equivalent of tens of thousands of insurgent leaflets. X lowers his luggage from the carousel, places it all on a luggage cart and stands there as if he were waiting for another suitcase, until he sees the man with the black-lettered card against his chest. X approaches him and identifies himself with the passport and the countersign.

"Hello, I am Quiller."

"I am García, Mr. Quiller. I've been waiting for you. Follow me this way, please." X pushes his luggage cart after García leaving the passengers who are still waiting for their luggage, towards one of the

six Customs counters with an inspector or a line.

"Did you have a good trip, Mr. Quiller?" García asks, making conversation while he looks toward the Inspector's office, waiting for his pre-arranged contact to come out.

"It was very long, Mr. García, many hours," answers X with a marked and fairly believable gringo accent. In order to orient himself, he follows the gaze of his new guide and escort, his unknown protector.

X visually explores the customs area. Three inspectors are already checking the luggage of the first passengers. There are three automatic doors with two soldiers posted at each one. The closest is about 15 meters from where X and García are awaiting the appearance of the customs inspector García has made an arrangement with. Outside on the sidewalk, other guards pace among the taxi drivers and porters who are awaiting the travellers. X has begun to sweat, not so much from the heat or from what he sees, but because of what he fears -- the invisible, the unexpected. On both sides of the inspection counters are offices; above these is an improvised mezzanine covered with mirrors that reminds him of the observation posts over gambling tables in Las Vegas casinos. X thinks he sees, coming out of the pockets of the olive green shirts of the guards, the wires that connect to headphones half-hidden under the edges of their blue berets. X also observes that on their chests, wrapped around the shiny, dirty tie of the bureaucrat, the Customs officers are wearing a narrow wire like those that go to microphones used in television interviews. He imagines that behind the mirrors are hidden intelligence officials who look, listen, and give orders. X embroiders the details a little, but not much. The fear makes him feel humiliated. He tries to calm himself, and forgets for a moment that realizing the paranoia does not guarantee immunity. Perhaps there are no such microphones and headphones. García's unworried look at his side suspends his anxiety for an instant; a brief moment later it returns, with redoubled intensity. It worries him that this García may not be calm because he knows what he is doing, or because the circumstances require it, but rather because he is an irresponsible idiot that does not realize they have already been checked out and that when they feel like it they are going to grab them. An inspector, indistinguishable from the rest, approaches the counter, "How are you, García? Excuse the delay. There was a staff meeting."

"Don't worry, Robles, this is Mr. Quiller, the engineer, I told you about. He is bringing repair parts for the factory," the smiling, calm García breaks in.

"And what kind of parts are they, Mr. Quiller?"

X looks at García with an air of complete incomprehension, as if saying, "Now what?"

"Mr. Quiller doesn't speak much Spanish." García explains and X smiles like an idiot sitting on a flagpole.

"Ah, I see. Well, don't worry. Let's open this and see," says the inspector, pointing to the Sony carton.

This is not in the script. Right, García? He's supposed to stamp it and let it pass. You already gave him his \$50. So why is Robles screwing around?

"Yes, of course, inspector," answers García, adding in a lower tone as he leans across the Customs counter, "Look, Robles, we're in a hurry."

Robles touches the narrow wire next to his tie, looks García in the eye and then glances upward toward the two-way mirrors.

"Open this box, Mr. Quiller, please."

"Yes, of course."

X slowly unknots the nylon cord that is tied around the box. García puts two \$20. bills inside Quiller's passport and passes it to the inspector.

"Here are his papers," García says handing over the passport to Robles who takes the money and answers:

"Relax, García, tell the man not to worry, that it is a routine check but I have to do it. Everything should be okay. Are they really parts?"

X opens the flaps, exposing four rows of 30 IBM cassettes that Robles looks at with curiosity and surprise.

"And what are these parts for?"

García hesitates and answers, stammering,

"For ... adding machines."

The inspector indicates to Quiller to take out one of the small plastic cases so he can look at it. X puts his fingers between the side of the box and the ribbons in the first row and succeeds in pulling one out. With his thumb on one side and his index finger underneath, X hands the cassette to Inspector Robles, regretting it immediately. *I should have let him try to take it out. Robles opens a pen knife to cut the plastic seal. If he recognizes what they are, there are going to be problems. The military must have warned the inspectors. Someone has to do something.*

"And how much do each of these cost there in the States?" Robles asks, acting as if there was all the time in the world, as if X and García were two people he knew that he had just run into in the neighborhood cafe. His curiosity persists. The seal gives way to the knife blade.

"Right here, I have the invoice," says García, putting two more green \$20. bills in a folded sheet of yellow paper that appears in his right hand like another magic card while he is shaking a white handkerchief with the left. Robles does not pay attention to the paper or the money. Instead, he concentrates on the plastic case, opening and examining it with the curiosity and attention of an archeologist.

At the next inspection table another inspector whose features are curiously like Robles' puts his hands under the tight rope around the large suitcase belonging to the lady with the twins, looking for a bribe: "This is a used rope of the kids, Inspector ..."

X wonders if the two bureaucrats could be brothers but he scraps this thought when Robles calls his colleague Miranda. Meanwhile, García is trying to get Robles' attention, shaking the yellow invoice with the dollars — without success. He dries his sweaty forehead with the white handkerchief. One of the twins has a Tom and Jerry comic book in his right hand. On the cover are two mice sunbathing on top of an umbrella. Under it sleeps a cat with sunglasses. X observes that Miranda is wearing a thick gold ring set with a red stone on his middle finger. X is no longer thinking about Robles, Miranda, García, nor even the ribbons. X is now convinced that the scene in play will end in a interrogation impossible to deal with. *If something doesn't happen soon everything will be dead and buried. At best they will send me back to Miami on the next flight. At worst they will break us into pieces and this Quiller guy will not have even existed.* This is a scene which is necessary to interrupt immediately because X can not be deported, nor arrested, nor killed, at least not now, because he has too many important things to discover, to do and to remember in the next 52 hours.

X's eyes become deeply penetrating, the pupils dilate and take on a reddish metal color, like smelted iron. They are the eyes of an animal with a fire in its entrails. His body is equally tensed although his movements do not show it. X focuses his look on Inspector Miranda's ring, then on the boys' comic book and the metal border of the inspection counter. X feels as if a boiling liquid is running in his veins, as if he were being flooded by a feverish burst of adrenalin; all his energy is concentrating in his eyes, in his stare.

At his side García is arguing with Robles, who continues to examine the IBM ribbon with frank suspicion. The inspector is debating with himself over the agreement he made with García — the fear kindled by the officials' warnings to civilian personnel versus run-away appetite for U.S. dollars which drive him just like a streak of good luck at the roulette table does.

With increasing speed, X alternates his burning stare among the ring, the comic book and the metallic edge of the counter while he slowly closes the flaps of the Sony carton and moves the packing string to one side. Suddenly, Miranda pulls back his hand from among

the clothing of the lady with the twins, as if something slippery and slimy had bitten him, or as if he had cut himself on an unexpected knife blade. With a grimace of pain and fear he looks at his hand as if he were seeing it for the first time. With the other he twists the ring as if it were burning him, trying to get it off, to yank it from the swollen, deformed finger. He starts yelling at the same moment that the cat and mice on the comic book spontaneously catch fire and run flaming along the beach. The child throws the book onto the open suitcase. The black rubber surface of the counter touching the metal border lights up, releasing a thick dirty smoke as if the accumulated grease from all the greased palms were beginning to burn.

The attention of passengers, functionaries and soldiers focuses in on the screams of Inspector Miranda and the fire that now engulfs nylon underwear. The child with the comic book cries, frightened. His brother laughs and jumps up and down, excited and entertained. The lady screams and tries to put out the flames that are consuming her luggage. Robles stands absorbed and immobile, his back to his customers, holding in his right hand the difficult-to-recover, inspected ribbon. García stands as if fascinated by the smoke streaming from between Miranda's fingers. Later, when he remembers the incident he will swear that he smelled burning hair and flesh.

X picks up his papers and the yellow invoice with the \$20. bills. He places the Sony box on the luggage carrier and walking calmly, absently, he begins to cover the 15 meters that separate him from the automatic doors and the guards who seem not to see him as they move toward the source of the heat, fire and screaming. García follows him, at first unsure, as if doubting what is happening. Then, having decided, he moves forward to clear a path. From behind the mirrors emerge men with shades and automatic weapons, giving orders and pointing. X moves calmly toward the door and the parking lot. The electric eye detects him and activates the mechanism which separates the panes of bullet-proof glass. The shadow of the guard in front of the electric eye keeps the doors open. Porters, families and lovers take advantage of the open doors to come in out of the cold April afternoon, while X follows García among the parked vehicles to a lead-colored Torino. García opens the trunk and helps him stow the luggage. Within moments they leave the lot heading for the expressway to the capital.

X lowers the window and adjusts the sideview mirror. García drives cautiously, obeying, with special attention, the traffic laws. The vehicles that leave the airport and come onto the expressway after them look harmless. They do not see cars without license plates with long antennas and lone drivers.

X would like to tell García that from now on he should not offer so much money; that that excites them, awakening greed and suspicion. But he says nothing, thinking that there will be more opportune moments for a constructive evaluation. His attention is drawn, instead, to the clear transparency of this late Saturday afternoon in October in the suburbs of the great city, and he becomes aware that he doesn't recognize the city's face — not the buildings, not the

expressways, nor the route numbers on the buses. He feels like they could be travelling through the outskirts of any city. He feels strange, as if this were the first time he were visiting an unknown place.

"What do you think, García? Do you think that we've gotten away?"

"For now, no one is following us. But they can notify the first checkpoint two kilometers ahead, before the first highway exit. If we pass that I think we are alright."

García looks over at X. After a pause he continues, "Excuse me for saying this, Guerrero. I had heard of you but I did not expect you to be so cool-headed."

X looks at him, amused. "If it had not been for the fire we would be stuck. Since a diversion was created, we both acted instinctively; don't forget that I followed you, García."

"Well, more or less — no?"

"It's a shame they have the ribbon."

"But you brought enough to publish an encyclopedia. Don't get upset, Guerrero."

"That's not why. Someone is going to figure out what they are for and then will put 2 and 2 together. I would bet, for example, that Quiller will have problems leaving the country legally. And you, Garcia, it would be better if you don't go back to the airport for a while. Don't you think so?"

Ahead, over the expressway, is a column of smoke, black against the brilliant, blue, cloudless sky. "It looks like an accident," says García. "Strange, with so little traffic." Decreasing speed they near the military checkpoint. The traffic is moving into the two left lanes. About 200 meters ahead an overturned tanker truck of the state petroleum company is burning. The fire department has not yet arrived; they do not see any wounded on the roadway. All the passengers in the cars passing the accident look at the fire as if hypnotized, looking at the misfortune within the flames and smoke.

"García, did you notice how fire fascinates people? Incredible. It's as if everyone has a little bit of arsonist in them."

García looks at X beside him, with the images of what happened in Customs still fresh in his mind. Now he looks at the overturned tanker 200 meters beyond the checkpoint. The guards that normally check the vehicles coming from the airport are trying right now to prevent a bottleneck, ordering drivers to stop looking at the accident and clear the expressway. "You, in the grey Torino, come on, don't stop. Clear the road. Go on!" yells a traffic cop through the loudspeaker installed in the patrol car.

"It looks like we are lucky," says García.

Yes, luck. Except for that damned ribbon that was left in Customs and which, among other things, probably has the fingerprints of one Guillermo Francisco Grisante, 2nd Lieutenant in the National Army Reserves.

Translated by Marilyn Buck