

A NOVEL

**ALMOST
NEVER**

DANIEL SADA

TRANSLATED BY
KATHERINE
SILVER

Almost Never



Almost Never

Daniel Sada

Translated from the Spanish by Katherine Silver

Graywolf Press

Copyright © 2008 by Editorial Anagrama, S.A.

Translation © 2012 by Katherine Silver

First published in 2008 as *Casi Nunca* by Editorial Anagrama, Barcelona. This English translation first published in the United States of America by Graywolf Press.

This publication is made possible in part by a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board, through an appropriation by the Minnesota State Legislature from the Minnesota general fund and its arts and cultural heritage fund with money from the vote of the people of Minnesota on November 4, 2008, and a grant from the Wells Fargo Foundation Minnesota. Significant support has also been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts; Target; the McKnight Foundation; and other generous contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals. To these organizations and individuals we offer our heartfelt thanks.



Published by Graywolf Press

250 Third Avenue North, Suite 600

Minneapolis, Minnesota 55401

All rights reserved.

www.graywolfpress.org

Published in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-55597-609-5

Ebook ISBN 978-1-55597-044-4

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Graywolf Printing, 2012

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011944859

Cover design: Rodrigo Corral

Translator's Note

Daniel Sada died on November 18, 2011, while this book was in the final stages of production. The translator would like to express her gratitude for his kindness, generosity, and assistance in the preparation of the translation. She would also like to thank Enrique Servín Herrera, Roberto Frías, and Ethan Nosowsky, as well as Ledig House International.

For Gerardo Estrada

Part
In Search of Precious Treasure
One

Sex, as an apt pretext for breaking the monotony; motor-sex; anxiety-sex; the habit of sex, as any glut that can well become a burden; colossal, headlong, frenzied, ambiguous sex, as a game that baffles then enlightens then baffles again; pretense-sex, see-through-sex. Pleasure, in the end, as praise that goes against the grain of life lived. Conjectures cut short during a walk on a pale afternoon. Block after block, ascending, then descending. A strain in the step as well as the mind. The subject was one Demetrio Sordo, tall and thin, almost thirty, fond of the countryside where he plied his trade with a modicum of pleasure, but for recreation: what thrills? Nightly games of dominoes in seedy dives, and those strolls—few and quite dull—of a mere mile or two; or a cup of coffee in the evening, always solitary and perfectly pointless; or the penning of letters to known but already ghostly beings. Hence a rut, and—what should he do?: think, already anticipating certainties and doubts: lots of naysaying, and more reshuffling, all of which helped him find the spark he'd been lacking without taxing his brain on that overcast afternoon. Sex was the most obvious option, but the trick would be to do it every twenty-four hours. If only! A worthy disbursement, indeed. So that very night the agronomist went looking for a brothel. He went hesitantly. His mincing steps gave him away. He descended from the taxi and began walking as if on eggshells or as if the soles of his feet were being shredded by shards of glass. He found himself almost smack in the middle of the red-light district, which was not even remotely Edenic and, to make matters worse, was dimly illuminated. This was only the second time he'd visited such an inferno, so he didn't know where to go. Casting about, the first thing he saw was a row of scruffy-looking women in ironwood rocking chairs, each one next to the open door of her own mean hovel. A sordid spectacle stretching along the sidewalk he had started down. Those mincing steps quickly turned into long strides. A sensible sprint motivated by his wish to find a high-class brothel. He stopped and asked a passerby. The man willingly obliged. That one over there or the other farther on. Those are the costliest. Then came an exchange regarding the prostitutes he'd find in each (there were all kinds), though Demetrio preferred not to listen to more descriptions and instead took off apace without so much as a thank-you: and, there they were! one brothel named La Entretenida, and the other, Presunción: two yellow buildings like lumpy quadrangles that lent a touch of luster to the twilight: so—which would it be? A pleasant, somewhat extended quandary. He chose Presunción ... They charged an entrance fee, as if it were a museum, a bit of a stretch, that: then came a diffident handing over of cash. In exchange, the promise of instant happiness to ward off the gloom, for everything he'd so far fleetingly observed had made an impression,

as did the grandeur of the suggestive orange-tinted salon with its many empty armchairs. There was piped-in music but no dance floor: *ranchera* music, exclusively, and ever so loud.

Was this lugubrious vista luxurious? The newcomer, a gawker, took a seat and continued to gawk. The welcome: gracious hospitality: a chubby man kept pointing to a chair: the kindness of a reiterated gesture. The very next instant the same man asked: *What can I get you?* and the still-potential client said: *Wait a minute, wait.* A bashful blush mixed with ardor: Demetrio and his quest in the midst of so much shadowed beauty: overwhelming, but also—titillating? Fortunately, he began to make distinctions: he saw a swarthy brunette with generous proportions, an eccentric vulgarity who smiled like no other. She, aware of being chosen, deliberately settled sumptuously into her armchair in such a way as to regale the gawker with a full view of her luscious legs. An effective ruse, for Demetrio called her over and, solicitous, velvet voiced—come on over here!—she approached slowly: her wavy mane swayed with added élan. She looked as if she were sashaying down a catwalk. Then, without further ado—have a seat! let’s talk! Impatient insinuations necessarily followed by discreet (and somewhat playful) gropings. Modest maneuvers, high tension, a teetering on the edge. In other words, preludes to pleasure: two, yes two, seeking a robust merger, something above and beyond—perhaps—sexual commerce, then devolving into impertinent gawking, come hither and yon, now censorial, now welcoming; to this we’d have to add the shallow delights of the half-light where muteness reigned, making room for a play of features, bonding through lust: almost kissing, but—whack! the waiter’s importunity, to which: *Go away! I want sex not drinks.* And Demetrio, turning to the brunette, said: *Hey, listen, you, come on already, let’s go to bed.* How abrupt! He must have been really horny. And that was that, no dithering, almost at a run. Let’s now summarize their time behind closed doors: it was raining thus imperative for them to seek shelter as soon as possible: a rush to undress and a rush to screw, as well as all the rest, to wit, long kisses with exceedingly motile tongues, as if in time with the cadence of their lower regions; above, an exchange of saliva or prolonged smearing. Hopefully there wouldn’t be a sequence of distracting positions. He was spared: and: restrained initiative, hers more than his ... She offered her ardor, her extra, her unbridled pleasure, which led to almost maudlin caresses, as well as the ever-so-rhythmic hip action that swelled the man’s eyes and made his eyebrows rise, peaking, now! at which point Demetrio exploded and as he did so exclaimed: *That’s it ... baby ... yes ... ! How do you do it ...* Et cetera. And the sudden gush of sperm and a matchless orgasm with all the corresponding sensations. Satisfaction. Then hastily and carelessly dressing without even combing one’s hair to one’s liking in front of the mirror, not she, not he, not as one should, though the agronomist promised the lusty lass a second visit the following day, and the fee: as posted, but to the madam rather than the brunette: the madam being a squat woman with an equatorial waist who occupied a luxurious suite just off the main salon. He entered. A

miniature hell. Danger. Inside, phew, pretentious scents. Shimmering purple armchairs where two bodyguards like reclining patriarchs conversed. Interruption: and: the bill. Payment. A fortune. One of Madam's eyes had a cloud in it. What can one say about that mysterious and imprecise gaze? We might add that nobody betrayed even the hint of a smile, and she, whose eyes switched back and forth like windshield wipers ... Madam gave Demetrio his change. Good-bye. An about-face and ... Let's see: no reason for him to almost run, even if he did have the impression that he was fleeing a world in flames.

The foregoing stands as a vast frame around what might appear to be perverse daubs of oily globs that puddle in spots to no purpose. Herein a riddle: what era are we in? The answer: 1945, the year the atomic bomb exploded and the Second World War ended. Modernities. But we are at the other end of the earth, in Oaxaca, a world cultural center, superior (let us say) to Tokyo. But we are also with Demetrio Sordo, the sexual agronomist, who one day among many began to do some bookkeeping. He had been visiting the Presunción brothel for more than a week. He had been making love to the brunette every day but Monday. Wonder of wonders: her name was Mireya, a name in suspended animation because in the brothel she was known as Bambi. Who knows why this nickname, for the wench wasn't delicate, like her namesake. Quite the contrary. For example, they could have called her Goddess Kali, because of her exuberance, or Goddess Isis, something like that, but—Bambi? Let's avoid getting waylaid by a superfluous obsession and focus on the bookkeeping. Demetrio began pouring numbers onto the pages of a lined notebook. His atomic pen slid awkwardly across the page. Nerves. In thirteen days a total of 104 pesos, even if they were well spent; counting pleasure by fives, plus the entrance fee, these by threes, an incomparable boon for an obsessive. On Monday, Mireya rested. She gave Demetrio fair warning and the chance to find another to hold in his arms, but only—as it turned out—that first Monday. The novelty was a slim, stylish woman, insipid ... Next: calculate his total income and subtract his expenses. The unexpected extra. Pleasure in the nude. Shared pleasure gains a firmer and firmer foothold. The dreadful was undergoing daily transformation: O amour! O silhouettism! Then, back to the numbers, a bit more than two hundred pesos. Plus all his other expenses. Also, minus Mondays, for he would no longer seek a sexual surrogate. He stood firm: no experimentation. It would be too sad, as it had been with that scrawny thing with a pretty face. Moreover, he should rest, he must. So, he would, and that was final: abstinence as relaxation: once a week: yes! otherwise he'd explode. Now comes a description of Demetrio's job: his workday went from seven in the morning till five in the afternoon, sometimes six, more infrequently seven. Once he'd fulfilled his obligations, he'd make his way to the lodging house of one Doña Rolanda, a frail, ultraconservative woman, where he rented her largest room. The daily routine: his return, his ennui sprinkled with drops of tolerance. Anyway, until exactly two weeks ago, automatism—what else!—during the week, for on Saturday and Sunday he indulged in what could be called “spiritual isolation,”

madness, or an Easter holiday in his rented room, where he had a radio: turn it on and surrender to the sounds of romantic music and stupid news broadcasts: countless hours in full-blown reveries. All of which now struck him as loathsome. But at night ...

The rigid hours for breakfast, lunch, and dinner were also loathsome. Key interludes, for in the dining room all sorts of subjects were raised, mostly by Rolanda, a woman who distilled bitterness. Unmarried, virgin, old, on top of a host of other afflictions. We can venture to guess what sorts of ideas made her shudder. Dark and decadent ones. Everything was fair game—the world and its inhabitants—except her far-distant God, the one to which she prayed. Imagine, then, the extent of her solitude, so evident. Abject boredom, even when praying, even when cooking ... Though she never stopped talking while carrying steaming dishes to the table or fulfilling her lodgers' petty requests. Her monologues brooked no interruptions ... Breakfast was served almost at dawn, as previously stated. Within the half hour eggs appeared, but sometimes only pastries. Never after that half hour, for the lodgers, four in all, had to leave for work. Moreover, let's figure that three left on the weekends. They returned to their villages in order to—or so they averred a hundred-odd times—enjoy the company of their wives and progeny. Not the agronomist, the obstinate bachelor, not till now. Though it seemed that his nearest of kin resided in the devil's lodgings. And evasive: Monday-through-Friday dinners, that is, conversation, a gathering of working people who often wound up extolling the virtues of their own jobs, Demetrio being the one with the highest salary, perhaps because he was the only semiprofessional among them: oh, the grand implicit advantage. If any of the others had been in business—alas!—they would have walked right out of that house in search of a better life, but they weren't, they were lowly wage earners, all somewhat younger than the agronomist; he, a roaring success! who earned two thousand pesos a month, so for him the pleasure of sex could be a fortuitous indulgence, but something was ruffling him: the aftertaste—how long could it go on? This notion brings us conveniently back to his bookkeeping, carried out during his Sunday-morning seclusion: Demetrio had to include the money he was saving monthly to buy a small house. A measly sum. After so many years of penny-pinching ... Penny-pinching, indeed, but the investment was growing in the bank: at what percentage? He had it in a fixed-term account, so he saw his totals only once a year. A significant sum. The first time—amazing! when he saw the number, and the second—wow! It really did make sense to save in one of those munificent institutions. He got the information twice. Twice, because Demetrio had spent two years and three months working as the administrator and principal agricultural expert for a ten-thousand-hectare orchard. "Private ranch" would be the more accurate appellation, but the owner refused to call it a ranch, that little word just didn't seem appropriate, for there were no cows, nor chickens nor goats, none

of those animals that produce wealth (not even pigs). So, no. Instead: pears, apples, or whatever other ideas for planting and harvesting he had: a clownish contumacy: the agricultural, indeed! In any case, before continuing in this vein, it would do to insert this note: nowadays the subject of ranches is of only peripheral interest, because ranches have no truck with the urban or the violent (our landowner would never have dreamed of planting marijuana or poppies), so we offer this information very much as an aside, only to turn our full attention back to the sexual, for that's what really matters. Let's, however, quickly assert that Demetrio Sordo had nothing to do with marketing the harvest: where it should go: near or far—no, never that! nor the renting of trailers, none of that tedious stuff. On the other hand, he was responsible for the drainage ditches; yes, and for all things related to the purchase of fertilizers and amendments, as well as the best insecticides to prevent plagues and other evils; and the manual work: the making of furrows, ridges, ditches, rows, and even terraces; as well as the rest: breaking clods, hoeing, plowing, grading, mowing, sifting, and threshing, in concert, needless to say, with the peasantry. All of which he carried off with great aplomb, which led the landowner to give Demetrio full jurisdiction over the orchard. Trust. Respect. He visited twice a week. He wanted results and that's what he got. At a serene pace that others might find torturous. But let's leave this for now and turn to the recently sexual. Before, as we said, the agronomist would make his way directly to the lodging house after the day's work; he would arrive beat, to bathe, to rest: seclusion, a clean break, the radio, waiting for dinnertime. Monotony. But ever since he'd met Mireya he made his way straight to the brothel: by taxi: a dirty and desperate dash, only the second time, for by the third, alas, a bath in the orchard, or rather: washing by bucketfuls. As far as that went, we must consider the time it took to heat the water to an optimal temperature. On a stove in a kitchen—of which there were both—though the distance between the bath and the kitchen exceeded 150 feet and counting. Further delays, but that's what Demetrio did the third time and thereafter: quite a chore this coming and going with buckets: four in all: slow considering what preceded and followed: stealing an hour from the workday—indeed! because if the agronomist didn't make it to the brothel on time, Mireya might be occupied with another client, a circumstance he wished to avoid by all means. Those first few days he was, mercifully, spared. Another option was to go to that aforementioned hell and wash there: in her room, before the screw. He asked, fearful of eliciting a negative response ... No, on the contrary, Mireya said that as long as he did it quickly ... Well, to clean off the dust of the fields was not a matter of a simple dousing, you had to stand under the water for a long time and thoroughly soap yourself, a privilege for which, Demetrio told her, he would be willing to pay an additional fee. Money for Mireya, secretly—really? and she agreed with a smile.

This mischief, nonetheless, carried a slight risk. Mireya's argument for compliance stressed that the arrangement would end when someone of ill will

informed Madam of what they'd chanced to see. An improbable peril, for lovers could always choose to screw under the shower. We mustn't forget that the madam was an odd bird, piling ploy upon ploy: shadows within shadows. True, there'd been no hitches on any of the previous days, no undue attention paid. Though Mireya had a surprise for Demetrio on his tenth visit. She blurted it out with dread, fearing that something so beautiful would end ugly and sad.

One might harbor hopes for good tidings in the wake of that ominous periphrasis "I have something to tell you." Only trembling and silence, however, followed. Mireya looked down at the ground: the rug crisscrossed with arbitrary lines must have given her an idea: a hint of caution: then—what?—and she muttered an utterance and then one more, and a third that barely made sense at all. In the face of such dread, Demetrio turned to his most vulgar memories from their numerous copulations, including a sequence of voluptuous insults that rose spontaneously from the depth of his soul, verbal sputum such as (we will quote but three): *While I'm pounding you with my cock, I want to stick my left index finger up your ass ...; Give it to me, baby!; or: I want you to be even more of a whore than you were yesterday; I want you to scratch my balls. But what I really want is for you to understand me.* Sexual depravity could go even further: diabolical sex; sexual impudence, a subsequent outburst, but the nature of these statements already indicated the rarefied terror to come.

Such folly deserves a long hiss from decent folk, theoretically and otherwise, though not from Mireya, for whom a string of such phrases must sound perfectly harmless, poor gentleman, dear me, it wasn't as if after his outbursts he'd threatened to kill her with a paring knife, not in a million years, just lust, gushing, and nearly idyllic pleasure. In the end, his behavior was quite original and not wholly beyond the pale, so, returning to "I have something to tell you," let's get right to the words that ensued: she and her calculations: her somewhat fearful *ahems*. At issue was a new command from Madam, one that redounded to her benefit: from now on Demetrio would have to pay an additional fee for each lay, for the simple reason that no prostitute could be reserved for anybody's exclusive use; if he visited the brothel on a daily basis he would be obliged to sleep with others.

Ouch. Capricious, given his steady patronage. Such unhealthy devotion was causing universal unease at the Presunción: this was the first time in its history a client had come to sin as punctually as he went, with intrepid daily devotion, to his job.... His needs, oh yes—but why with Mireya, when there were much hotter ones to be had? He'd fallen in love, by an arrow pierced: a catastrophe. This was a business, not a marriage agency: hence the extra fee: let's see: five pesos the first day; the second, five additional pesos; the third, five more, and that makes fifteen; by the fourth, it was already twenty; the fifth, twenty-five; the sixth, thirty, and—enough already! because the seventh: remember he took a rest? The thing was, by letting one day pass, just one! he effected a return to the reasonable price of five pesos. Great idea. Ouch. A

whim. He had no choice! Precise disclosure of the facts accompanied by a lowered head and a tied tongue. Demetrio considered it unfair, this madcap lack of proportion, and decided he would face down the madam that very day: *I'll give her a piece of my mind when I go to pay her. I know her bodyguards will be with her, but I don't care.* Then, footfalls; in anger, one could say. The agronomist did not dress or groom himself carefully; he'd dashed out ungirded. Was he in the right? Then, he entered brusquely and encountered Madam and her bodyguards in slothful indolence, lounging in armchairs with springy backs and plush pillows: and: three (incidental) guffaws: and without further ado:

“Listen, Mireya just told me that you ...”

“If you want to talk to me, you'll have to make an appointment. Today I can't. Tomorrow either. In a couple of days if you want ... Do you? Tell me now, because if not ...”

“Okay ... The day after tomorrow.”

“Come see me at five in the afternoon.”

“At five?”

“Yes. That's the only time I have free. I'll see you here.”

“Good. We'll be alone?”

“Alone. I promise.”

He'd made a strategic gain, small but accompanied by the happy thought that an appointment is an appointment. Even so, Demetrio still had to invent a decent pretext for departing from the orchard long before five in the afternoon. Later, when he took stock of the strength of his position, and considered that he had never left work early before, he concluded that any excuse whatsoever would suffice. All he had to do was throw out an "I have to leave," and, how could his subordinates, those lowly hicks, possibly reproach him? Power gave him elbow room: ah! self-sufficiency, daring, a dose of disdain, and other attributes that help us understand that his personality consisted of not offering explanations. The hour had come. Face-to-face, Madam and the agronomist. Tentative preambles. Alone in the aforementioned room. And he, finally, straight to the point:

"With all due respect, I'd like to say that your decision to steadily increase my fee doesn't seem fair."

Faced with such boldness Madam's anger (and amusement) were sure to ensue, and without pausing she fired back:

"Look, all my girls are hot, though I admit, some more so than others. If you want only Mireya, you know how things stand, and if you don't like it, go somewhere else! Otherwise, you won't get Mireya ..."

"What?"

"You heard right. I won't rent you Mireya. And now I'm going to call my bodyguards."

"No, wait! You win. I agree. I'll pay."

"What do you plan to do?"

"I'll come every day except Mondays, which is when she rests ..."

"Let's leave it at that. Now, go."

Then and there the idea of requesting a raise popped into the agronomist's mind. A boon in any case. An appointment with the owner of the orchard as soon as possible (God willing, tomorrow!), for only two weeks remained till the Christmas holidays. As he made his way toward the only taxi stand in the vicinity, there on the city outskirts, his mind was abuzz with practical thoughts, in spite of the ruckus around him: treacherous red-light district ... full of futile screws? And so in counterpoint, to balance things out, came the spark of the healthy idea that he should branch out, for there were as many lovable women as fish in the sea. Respectable love, sacred love, love that would last to an advanced age and have endless sexual summits. Or, as the priests put it: "Until death do us part." How easy it was for him to absorb such never-abeyant monumental truths! Yes, but what about Mireya: within reach: amorous, forthputting. The memory of her with legs widespread

brought back to his ears those loving words uttered two afternoons ago: *I like you more and more each time. I hope you keep coming.* Phrases spelled carefully out, phrases that might just bore into the agronomist's dreams: his future dreams. In the meantime, today's, perhaps; though he might also dream about the owner of the orchard; that gentleman with a sun-beaten face, tinged with a yellowish hue: so judicious and affable. The salary: an abstraction, gray or brownish in color ... Let us note that Demetrio didn't go to bed with Mireya that day—her upset, would she cry for love? mentally shaken by the what-ifs—for he'd already gone to the brothel to find a solution for what had none: the only good that came out of his appointment with the madam was that the next day the fee would return to normal: five pesos. Now to make another appointment as soon as he reached his lodgings, where there was a telephone. One of the few in Oaxaca.

The temporal stride taken here obeys a desire to avoid obvious foreshadowing, such as the call soon made, the appointment, the agreement on a time and place: all in good course, as it were: without obstacles. Instead, let us make note of the smiles of the grand employee and the grand boss, face-to-face, while—let us say—they both drank punch: nibbled on snacks: mouths chewing as if mumbling. Then Demetrio's preamble: he stammered; he simply couldn't find the words for his request, considering his dedication to his work, only to drift, let us say *gently*, to the great responsibilities the management of ... No, not that, no! More stammering. Better to endow his request with valor: straight to the issue of a raise, in a whisper, direct, and then: *Yes, that's fine. I'll give you a small raise: fifteen percent—how does that sound? Starting in January.* In the meantime, a Christmas bonus: tomorrow: which would have been his due anyway and which Demetrio had failed to take into account, so, while licking his lips, he scratched his head three times. Not until January, uh-oh, though he didn't say it, he thought it. Nevertheless, there was the other: the Christmas bonus ... more than enough to pay the madam for the services of she who had surely cried—though not excessively—the previous night.

Mireya may have ended up crying even more that same night, for at the last minute Demetrio again decided not to visit her. Emotional punishment, or indolence, or fortitude, or an attempt to stem the lavish outflow of cash: which turned out to be simple. It seems the boss had been expecting his request. Be that as it may, we must add that during the meeting neither devoted a single sentence to the daily doings of the orchard. The owner was well aware of his employee's efficacy. Therefore the finale, both discreetly bowing, neither daring to offer a parting handshake, then the return and spiritual excitement of he who found news awaiting him at the lodging house: a letter. Rolanda handed it to him almost as if it were a red-hot ember; from whom? his faraway mother, she'd gleaned from reading the back of the envelope. Bad or wonderful news? The surprise revealed in total reclusion. Fanciful speculations with each tearing (few) of paper. Then ensued the clumsy unfolding: three per sheet, but even so it is worth noting the

scrupulousness of the maneuver. Then he read:

Dear Son,

I know you are coming to spend Christmas with me. But I'd like you to come sooner and accompany me to a wedding in my hometown. As you know, because of my age and infirmities, I couldn't possibly attend such an event alone ...

To explain, his mother lived in the large house she'd inherited along with an ample amount of cash. Accompanying her were servants—a poorly paid woman and man—who did all the usual chores. She'd been a merry widow for five years. Mother of three: Demetrio, the eldest; and Filpa and Griselda, both married to gringos; one from Seattle, a city that is superior, as a world cultural center, to, let us say, Naples; and the other from Reno, a city that is superior, as a world cultural center, to, let us say, Badajoz; that is, they were out in the world, prisoners of marriages or perhaps already adapted and trained to live out their monotonous and well-ordered lives. Of course, they pretended to be strong, especially as they rarely came to Parras, the nicest town in the state of Coahuila, a world cultural center superior to, let us say, Brussels. And, so, things being what they were, Demetrio was the one left to accompany his mother. The wedding would be held in Sacramento, Coahuila, a world cultural center superior to, let us say, Luxembourg. We must consider, by the way, the long stretch of desert between Parras and Sacramento. A vast expanse without highways, unthinkable for a bus to risk riding on those rugged roads, potholed paths poorly or not at all paved, not even so much as graveled. The marriage would take place on the eighteenth of December; we are now the tenth, so, easy to do the math. The letter continued, though not profusely, not more than a spare sheaf of sententious sentences that softened the initial request: emphasis on the date, the understanding that the mother took for granted her son's yes, this being the norm, she would say "come" and he would: he let himself be led around like a dog by his master, especially because his mother's orders were infrequent, thus all the more compelling, as was this one, for it indicated a change of tack. Demetrio noted the careful calligraphy and even imagined his progenitor by candlelight: a bold image, somewhat diluted, but nonetheless ... It was inferred that no telegram would follow. Nothing like, "I'll be there, you can count on me. I'll go with you." To leave, yes, and with no thought to the mayhem this might unleash ... Departure tomorrow, the day after tomorrow at the latest, just before dawn; indeed, he had no choice ... and feeling his way ... No, he wouldn't say good-bye to Mireya, but he would inform his boss ... a brief telephone call: family affairs, circumstances beyond my control, and bye-bye. Christmas vacation would begin, Demetrio knew, on the eighteenth, so, to repeat: it is the tenth, therefore ...

Oh, yes, of course, the bonus: handy, well-earned, right? This shouldn't cause a problem, so he took care of it himself the following day. He wrote himself a check, for his was an authorized signature. In passing let us make note of the agronomist's absolute integrity: not one peso more nor one penny

less, from which we can infer that he already knew the amount he was due, and, alas! The bad part—each time he rang his boss's house to discuss the untimely trip, the wife answered—was turning over to an assistant the task of paying accounts due. This the easiest solution, considering his haste, but the responsibility, the possible blame, all yet to be seen ... uncertainty: What a concession! How equivocal! But only till his return: in theory: at the beginning of the New Year: oh no! Would everything be okay, God willing!?

After perusing the letter the docile son packed his suitcase. Hastily. He packed carelessly and slept briefly. He counted sheep. He didn't put on his pajamas.

And ...

It took two days (almost three) to get to Parras. The coming rub. Nasty calculus, and, well, what's done is done, as they say, the agronomist spent the night in his Oaxacan room per usual and left at daybreak for the outskirts of the aforementioned cultural city, where there was a runway for small airplanes.

Now, to regress for a moment, it's worth mentioning one of Doña Rolanda's habits: she loved to read the local newspaper. The irregularity of these rustic publications made reading about mundane maladies and natural disasters that much more exciting. One issue a week was the norm, but more normal was for it to fail to appear, though news of great consequence warranted a limited-edition gazette, printed and sold out in a trice: an infrequent occurrence, only in cases of extraordinary events—bad? good? thus it was with the bomb: that perverse achievement that culminated in an explosion and mushroom cloud: though ... on the other end of the earth: over there in Japan, thousands dead ... That horror, with a host of details, was mentioned one Thursday by the landlady to her fellow diners, who, wholly unconcerned, continued to scoop up her beans. Then came her final flourish:

"Any moment now another bomb will explode and the world will come to an end."

Guffaws in response, not a single indication of alarm. The news, it seems, had been attended to as if a leaf had fallen from a tree. Full focus on the scrumptious. Beans for dinner ... this the only dish, though plentiful, accompanied by plump rolls ... It's also worth mentioning, by the way, that beans made with lard are much tastier, as these were on this occasion.

"The bomb was dropped from an airplane."

Silence or the continued shoveling of food. Words, which ones? Only hers ... tossed into the air.

"What? Aren't you worried?! The world is about to come to an end!"

Demetrio shook his head, just as smug as can be, made a move to stand up to assert his authority, and did so, but first he wiped his tangled lips and spoke.

"Look, señora, if the world is going to end, let it end already."

"What?!"

"Yes, let it end; after all ..."

The others chimed in: “Let it end, let it end.” Derision for the defeated one; though: how callous this mediocre—somewhat shameful?—merrymaking, enough to make Doña Rolanda feel crushed by the indiscretion (that almost infantile chorus of “Let it end!” continued), my, my! the lady felt intimidated but not before she’d done further damage by uttering one last sentence: *It’s just that, can you imagine how many Japanese have died!* In response: not a sigh, not even for the sake of politeness: nope! why second the motion? May she and her facts fade straightaway. Hence, already shrunken and small, she uttered one last word: “Hi-ro-shi-ma,” a vague subconscious input Demetrio unwittingly recorded, so effectively that when he was sitting on a bench in a rectangular room, that is, a waiting room, he muttered the word as if trying to spit it out. The small plane that would carry him to Nochistlán had limited capacity: eight passengers. The agronomist was quite familiar with this grasshopper-like flight. And all the while: “Hi-ro-shi-ma, Hi-ro-shi-ma.” And, by way of counterpoint, a view of the concrete: the awaiting plane. And then the imagined: the bomb: from what height was it dropped? His guts churned at the mere thought that he would board a plane that might be carrying—a bomb! Terrifying associations growing grimmer and grimmer ... Moments later the announcement of the plane’s departure. There weren’t eight passengers, only five, and still his fears: that the contraption would fall or that the bomb would explode in midair. Nevertheless, the boarding and the takeoff and finally the airborne motion: thick clouds angrily shook the plane, enough to make one think the worst. Bah! We needn’t dwell on this because nothing terrible happened. Landing put an end to the paranoia after a miserable hour that, by the way, had the landlady not mentioned the bomb or the airplane and even less the thousands of dead Japanese—careful now!—would have been COMPLETELY NORMAL, for this was not the first time Demetrio had taken this flight.

Inevitable regression once his feet touched the ground. Memories of Mireya, a fleeting but always sensual silhouette: “For sure she’ll get it on with others and at some point while she’s doing it she’ll shout out my name.” Such miserable thoughts made the agronomist ill, but, what could he do to rid himself of something that had already become abhorrently persistent?: “She’ll miss me. My naked body will appear in her dreams.” And as he turned away from the Nochistlán airfield, he redoubled his efforts to stroll along the pavement with a graceful air, and we say “air” because the local breeze caressed him: swirled around him, perhaps, to purify the traveler’s incantation: “No-chis-tlán,” “Hir-ro-shi-ma,” “Mi-re-ya,” “Pa-rras,” verbal scraps, parsimonious swaying that finally touched down on an unreal, deep, shifting surface, whereby the agronomist would soon forget Oaxaca completely. Nor did he wish to cram himself into that future frame called Parras, on which his mother appeared embossed (unblemished), or better said: where decency sparkled in colorful abstraction ... From Nochistlán, which was not by any measure a world cultural center, he would take the bus to Cuautla, which wasn’t either (unless someone would like to claim