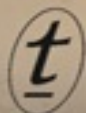


J. M. COETZEE

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

The Childhood
of Jesus



THE CHILDHOOD OF JESUS

J. M. Coetzee was the first author to win the Booker Prize twice and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. His work includes *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *The Master of Petersburg*, *Disgrace* and *Diary of a Bad Year*. He lives in Adelaide.

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CHAPTER 1

THE MAN at the gate points them towards a low, sprawling building in the middle distance. ‘If you hurry,’ he says, ‘you can check in before they close their doors for the day.’

They hurry. *Centro de Reubicación Novilla*, says the sign. *Reubicación*: what does that mean? Not a word he has learned.

The office is large and empty. Hot too—even hotter than outside. At the far end a wooden counter runs the width of the room, partitioned by panes of frosted glass. Against the wall is an array of filing drawers in varnished wood.

Suspended over one of the partitions is a sign: *Recién Llegados*, the words stencilled in black on a rectangle of cardboard. The clerk behind the counter, a young woman, greets him with a smile.

‘Good day,’ he says. ‘We are new arrivals.’ He articulates the words slowly, in the Spanish he has worked hard to master. ‘I am looking for employment, also for a place to live.’ He grips the boy under the armpits and lifts him so that she can see him properly. ‘I have a child with me.’

The girl reaches out to take the boy’s hand. ‘Hello, young man!’ she says. ‘He is your grandson?’

‘Not my grandson, not my son, but I am responsible for him.’

‘A place to live.’ She glances at her papers. ‘We have a room free here at the Centre that you can use while you look for something better. It won’t be luxurious, but perhaps you won’t mind that. As for employment, let us explore that in the morning—you look tired, I am sure you want to rest. Have you travelled far?’

‘We have been on the road all week. We have come from Belstar, from the camp. Are you familiar with Belstar?’

‘Yes, I know Belstar well. I came through Belstar myself. Is that where you learned your Spanish?’

‘We had lessons every day for six weeks.’

‘Six weeks? You are lucky. I was in Belstar for three months. I almost perished of boredom. The only thing that kept me going was the Spanish lessons. Did you by any chance have señora Piñera as a teacher?’

‘No, our teacher was a man.’ He hesitates. ‘May I raise a different matter? My boy’—he glances at the child—‘is not well. Partly it is because he is upset, confused and upset, and hasn’t been eating properly. He found the food in the camp strange, didn’t like it. Is there anywhere we can get a proper meal?’

‘How old is he?’

‘Five. That is the age he was given.’

‘And you say he is not your grandson.’

‘Not my grandson, not my son. We are not related. Here’—he takes the two passbooks from his pocket and proffers them.

She inspects the passbooks. ‘These were issued in Belstar?’

‘Yes. That is where they gave us our names, our Spanish names.’

She leans over the counter. ‘David—that’s a nice name,’ she says. ‘Do you like your name, your man?’

The boy regards her levelly but does not reply. What does she see? A slim, pale-faced child wearing a woollen coat buttoned to the throat, grey shorts covering his knees, black lace-up boots over woollen socks, and a cloth cap at a slant.

‘Don’t you find those clothes very hot? Would you like to take off your coat?’

The boy shakes his head.

He intervenes. ‘The clothes are from Belstar. He chose them himself, from what they had to offer. He has become quite attached to them.’

‘I understand. I asked because he seemed a bit warmly dressed for a day like today. Let me mention: we have a depository here at the Centre where people donate clothing that their children have outgrown. It is open every morning on weekdays. You are welcome to help yourself. You will find more variety than at Belstar.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Also, once you have filled in all the necessary forms you can draw money on your passbook. You have a settlement allowance of four hundred reals. The boy too. Four hundred each.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Now let me show you to your room.’ She leans across and whispers to the woman at the next counter, the counter labelled *Trabajos*. The woman pulls open a drawer, rummages in it, shakes her head.

‘A slight hitch,’ says the girl. ‘We don’t seem to have the key to your room. It must be with the building supervisor. The supervisor’s name is señora Weiss. Go to Building C. I will draw you a map. When you find señora Weiss, ask her to give you the key to C-55. Tell her that Ana from the mail office sent you.’

‘Wouldn’t it be easier to give us another room?’

‘Unfortunately C-55 is the only room that is free.’

‘And food?’

‘Food?’

‘Yes. Is there somewhere we can eat?’

‘Again, speak to señora Weiss. She should be able to help you.’

‘Thank you. One last question: Are there organizations here that specialize in bringing people together?’

‘Bringing people together?’

‘Yes. There must surely be many people searching for family members. Are there organizations that help to bring families together—families, friends, lovers?’

‘No, I’ve never heard of such an organization.’

Partly because he is tired and disoriented, partly because the map the girl has sketched for him is not clear, partly because there are no signposts, it takes him a long time to find Building C and the office of señora Weiss. The door is closed. He knocks. There is no reply.

He stops a passer-by, a tiny woman with a pointy, mouse-like face wearing the chocolate-coloured

uniform of the Centre. 'I am looking for señora Weiss,' he says.

'She's off,' says the young woman, and when he does not understand: 'Off for the day. Come back in the morning.'

'Then perhaps you can help us. We are looking for the key to room C-55.'

The young woman shakes her head. 'Sorry, I don't handle keys.'

They make their way back to the Centro de Reubicación. The door is locked. He raps on the glass. There is no sign of life inside. He raps again.

'I'm thirsty,' whines the boy.

'Hang on just a little longer,' he says. 'I will look for a tap.'

The girl, Ana, appears around the side of the building. 'Were you knocking?' she says. Again he is struck: by her youth, by the health and freshness that radiate from her.

'Señora Weiss seems to have gone home,' he says. 'Is there not something you can do? Do you not have a—what do you call it?—a *llave universal* to open our room?'

'*Llave maestra*. There is no such thing as a *llave universal*. If we had a *llave universal* all our troubles would be over. No, señora Weiss is the only one with a *llave maestra* for Building C. Do you perhaps have a friend who can put you up for the night? Then you can come back in the morning and speak to señora Weiss.'

'A friend who can put us up? We arrived on these shores six weeks ago, since when we have been living in a tent in a camp out in the desert. How can you expect us to have friends here who will put us up?'

Ana frowns. 'Go to the main gate,' she orders. 'Wait for me outside the gate. I will see what I can do.'

They pass through the gate, cross the street, and sit down in the shade of a tree. The boy nestles his head on his shoulder. 'I'm thirsty,' he complains. 'When are you going to find a tap?'

'Hush,' he says. 'Listen to the birds.'

They listen to the strange birdsong, feel the strange wind on their skins.

Ana emerges. He stands up and waves. The boy gets to his feet too, arms stiffly by his sides, thumbs clenched in his fists.

'I've brought some water for your son,' she says. 'Here, David, drink.'

The child drinks, gives the cup back to her. She puts it in her bag. 'Was that good?' she asks.

'Yes.'

'Good. Now follow me. It's quite a walk, but you can look on it as exercise.'

Swiftly she strides along the track across the parkland. An attractive young woman, no denying that, though the clothes she wears hardly become her: a dark, shapeless skirt, a white blouse tight at the throat, flat shoes.

By himself he might be able to keep up with her, but with the child in his arms he cannot. He calls out: 'Please—not so fast!' She ignores him. At an ever-increasing distance he follows her across the park, across a street, across a second street.

Before a narrow, plain-looking house she pauses and waits. 'This is my place,' she says. She unlocks the front door. 'Follow me.'

She leads them down a dim corridor, through a back door, down rickety wooden stairs, into a small yard overgrown with grass and weeds, enclosed on two sides by a wooden fence and on the third by chain-link wire.

‘Have a seat,’ she says, indicating a rusty cast-iron chair half covered in grass. ‘I’ll get you something to eat.’

He has no wish to sit. He and the boy wait by the door.

The girl re-emerges bearing a plate and a pitcher. The pitcher holds water. The plate holds four slices of bread spread with margarine. It is exactly what they had for breakfast at the charity station.

‘As a new arrival you are legally required to reside in approved lodgings, or else at the Centre,’ she says. ‘But it will be all right if you spend your first night here. Since I am employed at the Centre, you can argue that my home counts as approved lodging.’

‘That’s very kind of you, very generous,’ he says.

‘There are some leftover building materials in that corner.’ She points. ‘You can make yourself a shelter, if you like. Shall I leave you to it?’

He stares at her, nonplussed. ‘I’m not sure I understand,’ he says. ‘Where exactly will we be spending the night?’

‘Here.’ She indicates the yard. ‘I’ll come back in a while and see how you are getting on.’

The building materials in question are half a dozen sheets of galvanized iron, rusted through in places—old roofing, no doubt—and some odds and ends of timber. Is this a test? Does she really mean that he and the child should sleep out in the open? He waits for her promised return, but she does not come. He tries the back door: it is locked. He knocks; there is no response.

What is going on? Is she behind the curtains, watching to see how he will react?

They are not prisoners. It would be an easy matter to scale the wire fence and make off. Is that what they should do; or should he wait and see what will happen next?

He waits. By the time she reappears the sun is setting.

‘You haven’t done much,’ she remarks, frowning. ‘Here.’ She hands him a bottle of water, a hand towel, a roll of toilet paper; and, when he looks at her questioningly: ‘No one will see you.’

‘I have changed my mind,’ he says. ‘We will go back to the Centre. There must be a public room where we can spend the night.’

‘You can’t do that. The gates at the Centre are closed. They close at six.’

Exasperated, he strides over to the stack of roofing, drags out two sheets, and leans them at an angle against the wooden fence. He does the same with third and fourth sheets, making a rude lean-to. ‘That’s that what you have in mind for us?’ he says, turning to her. But she is gone.

‘This is where we are going to sleep tonight,’ he tells the boy. ‘It will be an adventure.’

‘I’m hungry,’ says the boy.

‘You haven’t eaten your bread.’

‘I don’t like bread.’

‘Well, you will have to get used to it, because that is all there is. Tomorrow we will find something better.’

Mistrustfully the boy picks up a slice of bread and nibbles at it. His fingernails, he notices, are

black with dirt.

As the last daylight wanes, they settle down in their shelter, he on a bed of weeds, the boy in the crook of his arm. Soon the boy is asleep, his thumb in his mouth. In his own case sleep is slow coming. He has no coat; in a while the cold begins to seep up into his body; he begins to shiver.

It is not serious, it is only cold, it will not kill you, he says to himself. The night will pass, the sun will rise, the day will come. Only let there not be crawling insects. Crawling insects will be too much.

He is asleep.

In the early hours he wakes up, stiff, aching with cold. Anger wells up in him. Why this pointless misery? He crawls out of the shelter, gropes his way to the back door, and knocks, first discreetly, then more and more loudly.

A window opens above; by moonlight he can faintly make out the girl's face. 'Yes?' she says. 'Is something wrong?'

'Everything is wrong,' he says. 'It is cold out here. Will you please let us into the house.'

There is a long pause. Then: 'Wait,' she says.

He waits. Then: 'Here,' says her voice.

An object falls at his feet: a blanket, none too large, folded in four, made of some rough material smelling of camphor.

'Why do you treat us like this?' he calls out. 'Like dirt?'

The window thuds to.

He crawls back into the shelter, wraps the blanket around himself and the sleeping child.

He is woken by a clamour of birdsong. The boy, still sound asleep, lies turned away from him, his cap under his cheek. His own clothes are damp with dew. He dozes away again. When next he opens his eyes the girl is gazing down on him. 'Good morning,' she says. 'I have brought you some breakfast. I have to leave soon. When you are ready I will let you out.'

'Let us out?'

'Let you out through the house. Please be quick. Don't forget to bring the blanket and the towel.'

He wakes the child. 'Come,' he says, 'time to get up. Time for breakfast.'

They pee side by side in a corner of the yard.

Breakfast turns out to be more bread and water. The child disdains it; he himself is not hungry. He leaves the tray untouched on the step. 'We are ready to go,' he calls out.

The girl leads them through the house into the empty street. 'Goodbye,' she says. 'You can come back tonight if you need to.'

'What about the room you promised at the Centre?'

'If the key can't be found, or the room has been taken in the meantime, you can sleep here again. Goodbye.'

'Just a minute. Can you help us with some money?' Thus far he has not had to beg, but he does not know where else to turn.

'I said I would help you, I didn't say I would provide you with money. For that you will have to go to the offices of the Asistencia Social. You can catch a bus into the city. Be sure to take your passport along, and your proof of residence. Then you can draw your relocation allowance. Alternatively you

can find a job and ask for an advance. I won't be at the Centre this morning, I have meetings, but you go there and tell them you are looking for a job and want *un vale*, they will know what you mean. *Un vale*. Now I really must run.'

The track he and the boy follow across the empty parklands turns out to be the wrong one; by the time they reach the Centre the sun is already high in the sky. Behind the *Trabajos* counter is a woman of middle age, stern-faced, her hair drawn back over her ears and tied tightly behind.

'Good morning,' he says. 'We checked in yesterday. We are new arrivals, and I am looking for work. I understand you can give me *un vale*.'

'*Vale de trabajo*,' says the woman. 'Show me your passbook.'

He gives her his passbook. She inspects it, returns it. 'I will write you a *vale*, but as for the line of work you do, that is up to you to decide on.'

'Have you any suggestions for where I should begin? This is foreign territory to me.'

'Try the docks,' says the woman. 'They are usually on the lookout for workers. Catch the number 2 bus. It leaves from outside the main gate every half-hour.'

'I don't have money for buses. I don't have money at all.'

'The bus is free. All buses are free.'

'And a place to stay? May I raise the question of a place to stay? The young lady who was on duty yesterday, Ana she is called, reserved a room for us, but we haven't been able to gain access.'

'There are no rooms free.'

'There was a room free yesterday, room C-55, but the key was mislaid. The key was in the care of señora Weiss.'

'I know nothing about that. Come back this afternoon.'

'Can't I speak to señora Weiss?'

'There is a meeting of senior staff this morning. Señora Weiss is at the meeting. She will be back in the afternoon.'

CHAPTER 2

ON THE 29 bus he examines the *vale de trabajo* he has been given. It is nothing but a leaf torn from a notepad, on which is scribbled: 'Bearer is a new arrival. Please consider him for employment.' No official stamp, no signature, simply the initials P.X. It all seems very informal. Will it be enough to get him a job?

They are the last passengers to dismount. Considering how extensive the docks are—wharves stretch upriver as far as the eye can see—they are strangely desolate. On only one quay does there seem to be activity: a freighter is being loaded or unloaded, men are ascending and descending the gangplank.

He approaches a tall man in overalls who seems to be supervising operations. 'Good day,' he says. 'I am looking for work. The people at the Relocation Centre said I should come here. Are you the right person to speak to? I have a *vale*.'

'You can speak to me,' says the man. 'But are you not a little old for an *estibador*?'

Estibador? He must look baffled, for the man (the foreman?) mimes swinging a load onto his back and staggering under the weight.

'Ah, *estibador*!' he exclaims. 'I am sorry, my Spanish is not good. No, not too old at all.'

Is it true, what he has just heard himself say? Is he really not too old for heavy work? He does not feel old, just as he does not feel young. He does not feel of any particular age. He feels ageless, if that is possible.

'Try me out,' he proposes. 'If you decide I am not up to it, I will quit at once, with no hard feelings.'

'Good,' says the foreman. He screws the *vale* into a ball and lobs it into the water. 'You can start at once. The youngster is with you? He can wait here with me, if you like. I'll keep an eye on him. As for your Spanish, don't worry, persist. One day it will cease to feel like a language, it will become the way things are.'

He turns to the boy. 'Will you stay with this gentleman while I help carry the bags?'

The boy nods. He has his thumb in his mouth again.

The gangplank is wide enough for only one man. He waits while a stevedore, bearing a bulging sack on his back, descends. Then he climbs up to the deck and down a stout wooden ladder into the hold. It takes a while for his eyes to adjust to the half-light. The hold is heaped with identical bulging sacks, hundreds of them, maybe thousands.

'What is in the sacks?' he asks the man beside him.

The man regards him oddly. '*Granos*,' he says.

He wants to ask what the sacks weigh, but there is no time. It is his turn.

Perched on top of the heap is a big fellow with brawny forearms and a wide grin whose job is evidently to drop a sack onto the shoulders of the stevedore waiting in line. He turns his back, the sack descends; he staggers, then grips the corners as he sees the other men do, takes a first step, second. Is he really going to be able to climb the ladder bearing this heavy weight, as the other men

are doing? Does he have it in him?

‘Steady, *viejo*,’ says a voice behind him. ‘Take your time.’

He places his left foot on the lowest rung of the ladder. It is a matter of balance, he tells himself, keeping steady, of not letting the sack slide or the contents shift. Once things begin to shift or slide you are lost. You go from being a stevedore to being a beggar shivering in a tin shelter in a stranger’s backyard.

He brings up his right foot. He is beginning to learn something about the ladder: that if you rest your chest against it then the weight of the sack, instead of threatening to topple you off balance, will stabilize you. His left foot finds the second rung. There is a light ripple of applause from below. He grits his teeth. Eighteen rungs to go (he has counted them). He will not fail.

Slowly, a step at a time, resting at each step, listening to his racing heart (What if he has a heart attack? What an embarrassment that will be!), he ascends. At the very top he teeters, then slumps forward so that the sack sags onto the deck.

He gets to his feet again, indicates the sack. ‘Can someone give me a hand?’ he says, trying to control his panting, trying to sound casual. Willing hands heave the sack onto his back.

The gangplank presents its own difficulties: it rocks gently from side to side as the ship moves, offering none of the support that the ladder did. He tries his best to hold himself erect as he descends, even though this means he cannot see where he is placing his feet. He fixes his eyes on the boy, who stands stock-still beside the foreman, observing. *Let me not shame him!* he says to himself.

Without a stumble he reaches the quayside. ‘Turn left!’ calls out the foreman. Laboriously he turns. A cart is in the process of drawing up, a low flat-bottomed cart hauled by two huge horses with shaggy fetlocks. Percherons? He has never seen a Percheron in the flesh. Their rank, urinous smell envelops him.

He turns and lets the sack of grain fall into the bed of the cart. A young man wearing a battered hat leaps lightly aboard and drags the sack forward. One of the horses drops a load of steaming dung. ‘Out of the way!’ calls out a voice behind him. It is the next of the stevedores, the next of his workmates with the next sack.

He retraces his steps into the hold, returns with a second load, then a third. He is slower than his mates (they have sometimes to wait for him), but not much slower; he will improve as he gets used to the work and his body toughens. Not too old, after all.

Though he is holding them up, he senses no animus from the other men. On the contrary, they give him a cheery word or two, and a friendly slap on the back. If this is stevedoring, it is not such a bad job. At least one is accomplishing something. At least one is helping to move grain, grain that will be turned into bread, the staff of life.

A whistle blows. ‘Break-time,’ explains the man beside him. ‘If you want to—you know.’

The two of them urinate behind a shed, wash their hands at a tap. ‘Is there someplace one can get a cup of tea?’ he asks. ‘And perhaps something to eat?’

‘Tea?’ says the man. He seems amused. ‘Not that I know of. If you are thirsty you can use my mug, but bring your own tomorrow.’ He fills his mug at the tap, proffers it. ‘Bring a loaf too, or half a loaf. It’s a long day on an empty stomach.’

The break lasts only ten minutes, then the work of unloading resumes. By the time the foreman blows his whistle for the end of the day, he has carried thirty-one sacks out of the hold onto the wharf.

In a full day he could carry perhaps fifty. Fifty sacks a day: two tonnes, more or less. Not a great deal. A crane could move two tonnes in one go. Why do they not use a crane?

‘A good young man, this son of yours,’ says the foreman. ‘No trouble at all.’ No doubt he calls him a young man, *un jovencito*, to make him feel good. A good young man who will grow up to be a stevedore too.

‘If you were to bring in a crane,’ he observes, ‘you could get the unloading done in a tenth of the time. Even a small crane.’

‘You could,’ agrees the foreman. ‘But what would be the point? What would be the point of getting things done in a tenth of the time? It is not as if there is an emergency, a food shortage, for example.’

What would be the point? It sounds like a genuine question, not a slap in the face. ‘So that we could devote our energies to some better task,’ he suggests.

‘Better than what? Better than supplying our fellow man with bread?’

He shrugs. He should have kept his mouth shut. He is certainly not going to say: *Better than lugging heavy loads like beasts of burden.*

‘The boy and I need to hurry,’ he says. ‘We must be back at the Centre by six, otherwise we will have to sleep in the open. Shall I come back tomorrow morning?’

‘Of course, of course. You have done well.’

‘And can I get an advance on my pay?’

‘Not possible, I’m afraid. The paymaster doesn’t do his round until Friday. But if you are short of money’—he burrows into his pocket and comes out with a handful of coins—‘here, take what you need.’

‘I am not sure what I need. I am new here, I have no idea of prices.’

‘Take it all. You can pay me back on Friday.’

‘Thank you. It is very kind of you.’

It is true. To keep an eye on your *jovencito* while you work and then to cap it all by lending you money: not what you would expect of a foreman.

‘It’s nothing. You would do the same. Goodbye, young man,’ he says, turning to the boy. ‘See you bright and early in the morning.’

They reach the office just as the woman with the dour face is closing up. Of Ana there is no sign.

‘Any news of our room?’ he asks. ‘Have you found the key?’

The woman frowns. ‘Follow the road, take the first turn right, look for a long, flat building, it is called C Building. Ask for señora Weiss. She will show you your room. And ask señora Weiss whether you can use the laundry room to wash your clothes.’

He picks up the hint and flushes. After a week without a bath the child has begun to smell; no doubt he smells even worse.

He shows her his money. ‘Can you tell me how much is this?’

‘Can’t you count?’

‘I mean, what can I buy with it? Can I buy a meal?’

‘The Centre does not provide meals, only breakfast. But speak to señora Weiss. Explain your situation. She may be able to help you.’

C-41, señora Weiss's office, is closed and locked as before. But in the basement, in a nook under the stairs lit by a single bare bulb, he comes upon a young man sprawled in a chair reading magazine. As an addition to the chocolate-coloured Centre uniform the fellow wears a tiny round hat with a strap under the chin, like a performing monkey's.

'Good evening,' he says. 'I am looking for the elusive señora Weiss. Have you any idea where she is? We have been allocated a room in this building, and she has the key, or at least the master key.'

The young man gets to his feet, clears his throat, and responds. His response is polite but in the end not helpful. If señora Weiss's office is locked then the señora has probably gone home. As for a master key, if one exists then it is likely to be in the same locked office. Similarly for the key to the laundry room.

'Can you at least direct us to room C-55?' he asks. 'C-55 is the room allocated to us.'

Without a word the young man leads them down a long corridor, past C-49, C-50...C-54. They reach C-55. He tries the door. It is not locked. 'Your troubles are over,' he remarks with a smile, and withdraws.

C-55 is small, windowless, and exceedingly simply furnished: a single bed, a chest of drawers, a washbasin. On the chest of drawers is a tray holding a saucer with two and a half cubes of sugar in it. He gives the sugar to the boy.

'Do we have to stay here?' asks the boy.

'Yes, we have to stay here. It will only be for a short time, while we look for something better.'

At the far end of the corridor he locates a shower cubicle. There is no soap. He undresses the child and undresses himself. Together they stand under a thin stream of tepid water while he does his best to wash them. Then, while the child waits, he holds their underwear under the same stream (which soon turns cool and then cold) and wrings it out. Defiantly naked, with the child beside him, he pads down the bare corridor back to their room and bolts the door. With their one and only towel he dries the boy. 'Now get into bed,' he says.

'I'm hungry,' complains the boy.

'Be patient. We will have a big breakfast in the morning, I promise. Think about that.' He tucks him into bed, gives him a goodnight kiss.

But the boy is not sleepy. 'What are we here for, Simón?' he asks quietly.

'I told you: we are here just for a night or two, till we find a better place to stay.'

'No, I mean, why are we *here*?' His gesture takes in the room, the Centre, the city of Novilla, everything.

'You are here to find your mother. I am here to help you.'

'But after we find her, what are we here for?'

'I don't know what to say. We are here for the same reason everyone else is. We have been given a chance to live and we have accepted that chance. It is a great thing, to live. It is the greatest thing of all.'

'But do we have to live here?'

'Here as opposed to where? There is nowhere else to be but here. Now close your eyes. It is time to sleep.'

CHAPTER 3

HE WAKES up in a good mood, full of energy. They have a place to stay, he has a job. It is time to start about the chief task: finding the boy's mother.

Leaving the boy asleep, he steals out of the room. The main office has just opened. Ana, behind the counter, greets him with a smile. 'Did you have a good night?' she asks. 'Have you settled in?'

'Thank you, we have settled in. But now I have another favour to ask. You may remember, I asked you about tracking down family members. I need to find David's mother. The trouble is, I don't know where to start. Do you keep records of arrivals in Novilla? If not, is there some central registry I can consult?'

'We keep a record of everyone who passes through the Centre. But records won't help if you don't know what you are looking for. David's mother will have a new name. A new life, a new name. Is she expecting you?'

'She has never heard of me so she has no reason to expect me. But as soon as the child sees her I will recognize her, I am sure of that.'

'How long have they been separated?'

'It is a complicated story, I won't burden you with it. Let me simply say I promised David I would find his mother. I gave him my word. So may I have a look at your records?'

'But without a name, how will that help you?'

'You keep copies of passbooks. The boy will recognize her from a photograph. Or I will. I will know her when I see her.'

'You have never met her but you will recognize her?'

'Yes. Separately or together, he and I will recognize her. I am confident of that.'

'What about this anonymous mother herself? Are you sure she wants to be reunited with her son? It may seem heartless to say, but most people, by the time they get here, have lost interest in their attachments.'

'This case is different, truly. I can't explain why. Now: may I look at your records?'

She shakes her head. 'No, that I can't permit. If you had the mother's name it would be a different matter. But I can't let you hunt through our files at will. It is not just against regulations, it is absurd. We have thousands of entries, hundreds of thousands, more than you can count. Besides, how do you know she passed through the Novilla centre? There is a reception centre in every city.'

'I concede, it makes no sense. Nevertheless, I plead with you. The child is motherless. He is lost. You must have seen how lost he is. He is in limbo.'

'In limbo. I don't know what that means. The answer is no. I am not going to give in, so don't plead with me. I am sorry for the boy, but this is not the correct way to proceed.'

There is a long silence between them.

'I can do it late at night,' he says. 'No one will know. I will be quiet, I will be discreet.'

But she is not attending to him. 'Hello!' she says, looking over his shoulder. 'Have you just got up

He turns. In the doorway, tousle-haired, barefoot, in his underwear, his thumb in his mouth, still half asleep, stands the boy.

‘Come!’ he says. ‘Say hello to Ana. Ana is going to help us in our quest.’

The boy ambles across to them.

‘I will help you,’ says Ana, ‘but not in the way you ask. People here have washed themselves clean of old ties. You should be doing the same: letting go of old attachments, not pursuing them.’ She reaches down, ruffles the boy’s hair. ‘Hello, sleepy head!’ she says. ‘Aren’t you washed clean yet? Tell your dad you are washed clean.’

The boy looks from her to him and back again. ‘I’m washed clean,’ he mumbles.

‘There!’ says Ana. ‘Didn’t I tell you?’

They are in the bus, on their way to the docks. After a substantial breakfast the boy is decidedly more cheerful than yesterday.

‘Are we going to see Álvaro again?’ he says. ‘Álvaro likes me. He lets me blow his whistle.’

‘That’s nice. Did he say you could call him Álvaro?’

‘Yes, that’s his name. Álvaro Avocado.’

‘Álvaro Avocado? Well, remember, Álvaro is a busy man. He has lots of things to do besides child minding. You must take care not to get in his way.’

‘He’s not busy,’ says the boy. ‘He just stands and looks.’

‘It may seem to you like standing and looking, but in fact he is supervising us, seeing to it that ships get unloaded in time, seeing to it that everyone does what he is supposed to do. It is an important job.’

‘He says he is going to teach me chess.’

‘That’s good. You will like chess.’

‘Will I always be with Álvaro?’

‘No, soon you will find other boys to play with.’

‘I don’t want to play with other boys. I want to be with you and Álvaro.’

‘But not all the time. It’s not good for you to be with grownups all the time.’

‘I don’t want you to fall into the sea. I don’t want you to drown.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll take great care not to drown, I promise you. You can shoo away dark thoughts like that. You can let them fly away like birds. Will you do that?’

The boy does not respond. ‘When are we going to go back?’ he says.

‘Back across the sea? We are not going back. We are here now. This is where we live.’

‘For ever?’

‘For good. Soon we will begin our search for your mother. Ana will help us. Once we have found your mother, you won’t have any more thoughts about going back.’

‘Is my mother here?’

‘She is somewhere nearby, waiting for you. She has been waiting a long time. All will become clear as soon as you lay eyes on her. You will remember her and she will remember you. You may think you

are washed clean, but you aren't. You still have your memories, they are just buried, temporarily. Now we must get off. This is our stop.'

The boy has befriended one of the carthorses, to whom he has given the name El Rey. Though he is tiny compared with El Rey, he is quite unafraid. Standing on tiptoe, he proffers handfuls of hay, which the huge beast bends down lazily to accept.

Álvaro cuts a hole in one of the bags they have unloaded, allowing grain to trickle out. 'Here, feed this to El Rey and his friend,' he tells the boy. 'But be careful not to feed them too much, otherwise their tummies will blow up like balloons and we will have to prick them with a pin.'

El Rey and his friend are in fact mares, but Álvaro, he notes, does not correct the boy.

His fellow stevedores are friendly enough but strangely incurious. No one asks where they come from or where they are staying. He guesses that they take him to be the boy's father—or perhaps, like Ana at the Centre, his grandfather. *El viejo*. No one asks where the boy's mother is or why he has to spend all day hanging around the docks.

There is a small wooden shed at the quayside which the men use as a dressing room. Though the door has no lock, they seem happy to store their overalls and boots there. He asks one of the men where he can buy overalls and boots of his own. The man writes an address on a scrap of paper.

What can one expect to pay for a pair of boots? he asks.

'Two, maybe three reals,' says the man.

'That seems very little,' he says. 'By the way, my name is Simón.'

'Eugenio,' says the man.

'May I ask, Eugenio, are you married? Do you have children?'

Eugenio shakes his head.

'Well, you are still young,' he says.

'Yes,' says Eugenio non-committally.

He waits to be asked about the boy—the boy who may seem to be his son or grandson but in fact is not. He waits to be asked the boy's name, his age, why he is not at school. He waits in vain.

'David, the child I am looking after, is still too young to go to school,' he says. 'Do you know anything about schools around here? Is there'—he hunts for the term—'*un jardín para los niños?*'

'Do you mean a playground?'

'No, a school for the younger children. A school before proper school.'

'Sorry, I can't help you.' Eugenio rises. 'Time to get back to work.'

The next day, just as the whistle blows for the lunch break, a stranger comes riding up on a bicycle. With his hat, black suit and tie he looks out of place on the quayside. He dismounts, greets Álvaro familiarly. His trouser-cuffs are pinned back with bicycle clips, which he neglects to remove.

'That's the paymaster,' says a voice beside him. It is Eugenio.

The paymaster slackens the straps on his bicycle rack and removes an oilcloth, revealing a green-painted metal cashbox, which he sets down on an upended drum. Álvaro beckons the men over. One by one they step forward, speak their names, and are given their wages. He joins the end of the line, waiting

his turn. 'Simón is the name,' he says to the paymaster. 'I am new, I may not be on your list yet.'

'Yes, here you are,' says the paymaster, and ticks off his name. He counts out the money in coins so many that they weigh down his pockets.

'Thank you,' he says.

'You're welcome. It's your due.'

Álvaro rolls the drum away. The paymaster straps the cashbox back on his bicycle, shakes hands with Álvaro, dons his hat, and pedals off down the quay.

'What are your plans for the afternoon?' asks Álvaro.

'I have no plans. I might take the boy for a walk; or if there is a zoo, I might take him there, to see the animals.'

It is Saturday, noon, the end of the working week.

'Would you like to come along to the football?' asks Álvaro. 'Does your young man like football?'

'He is still a bit young for football.'

'He has to start sometime. The game starts at three. Meet me at the gate at, say, two forty-five.'

'All right, but which gate, and where?'

'The gate to the football ground. There is only one gate.'

'And where is the football ground?'

'Follow the footpath along the riverfront and you can't miss it. About twenty minutes from here, I would guess. Or if you don't feel like walking you can catch the number 7 bus.'

The football ground is further away than Álvaro said; the boy gets tired and dawdles; they arrive late. Álvaro is at the gate, waiting for them. 'Hurry,' he says, 'they will be kicking off at any moment.'

They pass through the gate into the ground.

'Don't we need to buy tickets?' he asks.

Álvaro regards him oddly. 'It's football,' he says. 'It's a game. You don't need to pay to watch a game.'

The ground is more modest than he had expected. The playing field is marked off with rope; the covered stand holds at most a thousand spectators. They find seats without difficulty. The players are already on the pitch, kicking the ball around, warming up.

'Who is playing?' he asks.

'That's Docklands in blue, and in red are North Hills. It is a league game. Championship games are played on Sunday mornings. If you hear the hooters sounding on a Sunday morning, that means there is a championship game being played.'

'Which team do you support?'

'Docklands, of course. Who else?'

Álvaro seems in a good mood, excited, even ebullient. He is glad of that, grateful too for being singled out to accompany him. Álvaro strikes him as a good man. In fact, all of his fellow stevedores strike him as good men: hard-working, friendly, helpful.

In the very first minute of the game the team in red makes a simple defensive error and Dockland scores. ~~Álvaro throws up his arms and lets out a cry of triumph, then turns to the boy. 'Did you see that, young fellow? Did you see?'~~

The young fellow has not seen. Ignorant of football, the young fellow does not grasp that he should be attending to the men running back and forth on the pitch rather than to the sea of strangers around them.

He lifts the boy onto his lap. 'See,' he says, pointing, 'what they are trying to do is to kick the ball into the net. And the man over there, wearing the gloves, is the goalkeeper. He has to stop the ball. There is a goalkeeper at each end. When they kick the ball into the net, it is called a goal. The team in blue has just scored a goal.'

The boy nods, but his mind seems to be elsewhere.

He lowers his voice. 'Do you need to go to the toilet?'

'I'm hungry,' the boy whispers back.

'I know. I'm hungry too. We must just get used to it. I'll see if I can get us some potato crisps at half-time, or some peanuts. Would you like peanuts?'

The boy nods. 'When is half-time?' he asks.

'Soon. First the footballers must play some more, and try to score more goals. Watch.'

CHAPTER 4

RETURNING TO their room that evening, he finds a note pushed under the door. It is from Ana. *Would you and David like to come to a picnic for new arrivals? Meet at noon tomorrow, in the park by the fountain. A.*

They are at the fountain at noon. It is already hot—even the birds seem lethargic. Away from the noise of traffic they settle beneath a spreading tree. After a while Ana arrives, bearing a basket. ‘Sorry,’ she says, ‘something came up.’

‘How many of us are you expecting?’ he asks.

‘I don’t know. Perhaps half a dozen. Let us wait and see.’

They wait. No one comes. ‘Looks like it is just us,’ says Ana at last. ‘Shall we start?’

The basket turns out to contain no more than a packet of crackers, a pot of saltless bean paste, and a bottle of water. But the child wolfs down his share without complaint.

Ana yawns, stretches out on the grass, closes her eyes.

‘What did you mean, the other day, when you used the words *washed clean*?’ he asks her. ‘You said David and I should wash ourselves clean of old attachments.’

Lazily Ana shakes her head. ‘Another time,’ she says. ‘Not now.’

In her tone, in the hooded glance she casts him, he senses an invitation. The half-dozen guests who have failed to turn up—were they just a fiction? If the child were not here he would lie down on the grass beside her and then perhaps let his hand rest ever so lightly on hers.

‘No,’ she murmurs, as if reading his mind. The ghost of a frown crosses her brow. ‘Not that.’

Not that. What is he to make of this young woman, now warm, now cool? Is there something in the etiquette of the sexes or the generations in this new land that he is failing to understand?

The boy nudges him and points to the nearly empty packet of crackers. He spreads paste on a cracker and passes it across.

‘He has a healthy appetite,’ says the girl without opening her eyes.

‘He is hungry all the time.’

‘Don’t worry, he will adapt. Children adapt quickly.’

‘Adapt to being hungry? Why should he adapt to being hungry when there is no shortage of food?’

‘Adapt to a moderate diet, I mean. Hunger is like a dog in your belly: the more you feed it, the more it demands.’ She sits up abruptly, addresses the child. ‘I hear you are looking for your mama,’ she says. ‘Do you miss your mama?’

The boy nods.

‘And what is your mama’s name?’

The boy casts him an interrogative glance.

‘He doesn’t know her by name,’ he says. ‘He had a letter with him when he boarded the boat, but it was lost.’

‘The string broke,’ says the boy.

‘The letter was in a pouch,’ he explains, ‘which was hanging around his neck on a string. The string broke and the letter was lost. There was a hunt for it all over the ship. That was how David and I met. But the letter was never found.’

‘It fell in the sea,’ says the boy. ‘The fishes ate it.’

Ana frowns. ‘If you don’t remember your mama’s name, can you tell us what she looks like? Can you draw a picture of her?’

The boy shakes his head.

‘So your mama is lost and you don’t know where to look for her.’ Ana pauses to reflect. ‘Then how would you feel if your *padrino* began looking for another mama for you, to love and take care of you?’

‘What is a *padrino*?’ asks the boy.

‘You keep slotting me into roles,’ he interrupts. ‘I am not David’s father, nor am I his *padrino*. I am simply helping him to be reunited with his mother.’

She ignores the rebuke. ‘If you found yourself a wife,’ she says, ‘she could be a mother to him.’

He bursts out laughing. ‘What woman would want to marry a man like me, a stranger without even a change of clothing to his name?’ He waits for the girl to disagree, but she does not. ‘Besides, even if I did find myself a wife, who is to say she would want—you know—a foster child? Or that our young friend here would accept her?’

‘You never know. Children adapt.’

‘As you keep saying.’ Anger flares up in him. What does this cocksure young woman know about children? And what entitles her to preach to him? Then suddenly the elements of the picture come together. The unbecoming clothes, the baffling severity, the talk of godfathers—‘Are you a nun, Ana, by any chance?’ he asks.

She smiles. ‘What makes you say that?’

‘Are you one of those nuns who have left the convent behind to live in the world? To take on jobs that no one else wants to do—in jails and orphanages and asylums? In refugee reception centres?’

‘That is ridiculous. Of course not. The Centre isn’t a jail. It isn’t a charity. It is part of Social Welfare.’

‘Even so, how could anyone put up with a never-ending stream of people like us, helpless and ignorant and needy, without faith of some kind to give her strength?’

‘Faith? Faith has nothing to do with it. Faith means believing in what you do even when it does not bear visible fruit. The Centre is not like that. People arrive needing help, and we help them. We help them and their lives improve. None of that is invisible. None of it requires blind faith. We do our jobs and everything turns out well. It is as simple as that.’

‘Nothing is invisible?’

‘Nothing is invisible. Two weeks ago you were in Belstar. Last week we found you a job at the docks. Today you are having a picnic in the park. What is invisible about that? It is progress, visible progress. Anyway, to come back to your question, no, I am not a nun.’

‘Then why the asceticism that you preach? You tell us to subdue our hunger, to starve the dog inside us. Why? What is wrong with hunger? What are our appetites for if not to tell us what we need? If we had no appetites, no desires, how would we live?’

It seems to him a good question, a serious question, one that might trouble the best-schooled young nun.

Her answer comes easily, so easily and in so low a voice, as if the child were not meant to hear, that for a moment he misunderstands her: ‘And where, in your case, do your desires lead you?’

‘My own desires? May I be frank?’

‘You may.’

‘With no disrespect to you or to your hospitality, they lead me to more than crackers and bean paste. They lead, for instance, to beefsteak with mashed potatoes and gravy. And I am sure this young man—he reaches out and grips the boy’s arm—‘feels the same way. Don’t you?’

The boy nods vigorously.

‘Beefsteak dripping with meat juices,’ he goes on. ‘Do you know what surprises me most about this country?’ A reckless tone is creeping into his voice; it would be wiser to stop, but he does not. ‘That is so bloodless. Everyone I meet is so decent, so kindly, so well intentioned. No one swears or gets angry. No one gets drunk. No one even raises his voice. You live on a diet of bread and water and bean paste and you claim to be filled. How can that be, humanly speaking? Are you lying, even to yourselves?’

Hugging her knees, the girl stares at him wordlessly, waiting for the tirade to end.

‘We are hungry, this child and I.’ Forcefully he draws the boy to him. ‘We are hungry all the time. You tell me our hunger is something outlandish that we have brought with us, that it doesn’t belong here, that we must starve it into submission. When we have annihilated our hunger, you say, we will have proved we can adapt, and we can then be happy for ever after. But I don’t want to starve the devil of hunger! I want to feed it! Don’t you agree?’ He shakes the boy. The boy burrows in under his armpit, smiling, nodding. ‘Don’t you agree, my boy?’

A silence falls.

‘You really are angry,’ says Ana.

‘I am not angry, I am hungry! Tell me: What is wrong with satisfying an ordinary appetite? Why must our ordinary impulses and hungers and desires be beaten down?’

‘Are you sure you want to carry on like this in front of the child?’

‘I am not ashamed of what I am saying. There is nothing in it that a child needs to be protected from. If a child can sleep outdoors on the bare earth, then surely he can hear a robust exchange between adults.’

‘Very well, I will give you robust exchange back. What you want from me is something I don’t do.’

He stares in puzzlement. ‘What I want from you?’

‘Yes. You want me to let you embrace me. We both know what that means: *embrace*. And I don’t permit it.’

‘I said nothing about embracing you. And what is wrong with embraces anyway, if you are not a nun?’

‘Refusing desires has nothing to do with being or not being a nun. I just don’t do that. I don’t permit it. I don’t like it. I don’t have an appetite for it. I don’t have an appetite for it in itself and I don’t wish to see what it does to human beings. What it does to a man.’

‘What do you mean, *what it does to a man*?’

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