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TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY NATASHA WIMMER

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX NEW YORK

ROBERTO BOLAÑO



THE PART ABOUT THE CRIMES

The girl's body turned up in a vacant lot in Colonia Las Flores. She was dressed in a white long-sleeved T-shirt and a yellow knee-length skirt, a size too big. Some children playing in the lot found her and told their parents. One of the mothers called the police, who showed up half an hour later. The lot was bordered by Calle Peláez and Calle Hermanos Chacón and it ended in a ditch behind which rose the walls of an abandoned dairy in ruins. There was no one around, which at first made the policemen think it was a joke. Nevertheless, they pulled up on Calle Peláez and one of them made his way into the lot. Soon he came across two women with their heads covered, kneeling in the weeds, praying. Seen from a distance, the women looked old, but they weren't. Before them lay the body. Without interrupting, the policeman went back the way he'd come and motioned to his partner, who was waiting for him in the car, smoking. Then the two of them returned (the one who'd waited in the car had his gun in his hand) to the place where the women were kneeling and they stood there beside them staring at the body. The policeman with the gun asked whether they knew her. No, sir, said one of the women. We've never seen her before. She isn't from around here, poor thing.

This happened in 1993. January 1993. From then on, the killings of women began to be counted. But it's likely there had been other deaths before. The name of the first victim was Esperanza Gómez Saldaña and she was thirteen. Maybe for the sake of convenience, maybe because she was the first to be killed in 1993, she heads the list. Although surely there were other girls and women who died in 1992. Other girls and women who didn't make it onto the list or were never found, who were

buried in unmarked graves in the desert or whose ashes were scattered in the middle of the night, when not even the person scattering them knew where he was, what place he had come to.

The identification of Esperanza Gómez Saldaña was relatively easy. First the body was brought to one of the three Santa Teresa police stations, where it was seen by a judge and examined by more policemen and photographed. After a while, as an ambulance waited outside the station, Pedro Negrete, the police chief, arrived, followed by a pair of deputies, and he proceeded to examine her again. When he had finished he met with the judge and three policemen who were waiting for him in an office and asked what conclusion they had reached. She was strangled, said the judge, it's clear as day. The policemen just nodded. Do we know who she is? asked the chief. They all said no. All right, we'll find out, said Pedro Negrete, and he left with the judge. One of his deputies stayed behind at the station and asked to see the officers who had found the dead girl. They've gone back out on patrol, he was told. Well, get them back here, shitheads, he said. Then the body was taken to the morgue at the city hospital, where the medical examiner conducted an autopsy. According to the autopsy, Esperanza Gómez Saldaña had been strangled to death. There was bruising on her chin and around her left eye. Severe bruising on her legs and rib cage. She had been vaginally and anally raped, probably more than once, since both orifices exhibited tears and abrasions, from which she had bled profusely. At two in the morning the examiner concluded the autopsy and left. A black orderly, who had moved north from Veracruz years ago, put the body away in a freezer.

Five days later, before the end of January, Luisa Celina Vázquez was strangled. She was sixteen years old, sturdily built, fair-skinned, and five months pregnant. The man she lived with and a friend of his were small-time thieves who stole from stores and appliance warehouses. The police were alerted by a call from neighbors in the couple's building, located on Avenida Rubén Darío, in Colonia Mancera. After breaking down the door, they found Luisa Celina strangled with a television cord. That night, her lover, Marcos Sepúlveda, and his partner, Ezequiel

Romero, were arrested. Both were locked up at Precinct #2 and subjected to an interrogation that lasted all night, conducted by the police chief's right-hand man, Officer Epifanio Galindo, with optimal results, since before the sun came up Romero confessed to having maintained intimate relations with the deceased behind the back of his friend and partner. Upon learning that she was pregnant, Luisa Celina had decided to put an end to these relations, which Romero refused to accept, because he thought that he, not Marcos Sepúlveda, was the father of the unborn child. After a few months, when Luisa Celina wouldn't change her mind, he decided in a fit of insanity to kill her, which he finally did one night when Sepúlveda was away. Two days later, Sepúlveda was released, and Romero, rather than being sent to prison, remained locked up at Precinct #2, where the interrogations continued, their object this time not to clear up any lingering questions regarding the murder of Luisa Celina but to incriminate Romero in the murder of Esperanza Gómez Saldaña, whose body had by now been identified. Despite what the police expected, deceived as they were by the speed with which they had obtained the first confession, Romero stood firm and refused to implicate himself in the earlier crime.

Midway through February, in an alley in the center of the city, some garbagemen found another dead woman. She was about thirty and dressed in a black skirt and low-cut white blouse. She had been stabbed to death, although contusions from multiple blows were visible about her face and abdomen. In her purse was a ticket for the nine a.m. bus to Tucson, a bus she would never catch. Also found were a lipstick, powder, eyeliner, Kleenex, a half-empty pack of cigarettes, and a package of condoms. There was no passport or appointment book or anything that might identify her. Nor was she carrying a lighter or matches.

In March, the female reporter for the radio station El Heraldo del Norte, sister company of the newspaper *El Heraldo del Norte*, left the broadcast studio at ten with a male reporter and the sound engineer. They headed to the Italian restaurant Piazza Navona, where they ordered three slices of pizza and three small bottles of California wine. The male reporter was the first to leave. The female reporter, Isabel Urrea, and the sound

engineer, Francisco Santamaría, decided to stay and talk a little longer. They discussed work matters, scheduling, and programs, and then they began to talk about a friend who had left the station, gotten married, and gone to live with her husband in a town near Hermosillo, the name of which they couldn't recall but which they were sure was near the ocean and which for six months out of the year, according to this friend, was the closest thing to paradise. They both left the restaurant. The sound engineer didn't have a car, so Isabel Urrea offered to give him a ride home. No need, said the engineer, his house was nearby and anyway he would rather walk. As the engineer set off down the street, Isabel walked toward the place where she had left her car. As she got out her keys to unlock it, a shadowy figure appeared on the sidewalk and fired at her three times. The keys fell. A passerby some twenty feet away dropped to the ground. Isabel tried to get up but she could only lean her head against the front tire. She felt no pain. The shadowy figure approached and shot her in the forehead.

The murder of Isabel Urrea, covered the first three days by her radio station and paper, was explained as a frustrated robbery, the work of a lumatic or drug addict who probably meant to steal her car. The theory also circulated that the perpetrator might be a Guatemalan or Salvadorean veteran of the wars in Central America, someone desperate to get the money to move on to the United States. There was no autopsy, in deference to the family, and the ballistic analysis, which was never made public, was later lost for good somewhere in transit between the courts of Santa Teresa and Hermosillo.

A month later, a knife sharpener making his way along Calle El Arroyo between Colonia Ciudad Nueva and Colonia Morelos saw a woman clinging drunkenly to a wooden post. A black Peregrino with tinted windows passed by. At the other end of the street, the knife sharpener spotted an ice cream vendor approaching, covered in flies. The two men converged on the wooden post, but the woman had slipped or lost the strength to hold on. Her face, half hidden by her forearm, was a pulpy mass of red and purple flesh. The knife sharpener said they had to call an ambulance. The ice cream vendor stared at the woman and said she

looked as if she'd gone fifteen rounds with El Torito Ramírez. The knife sharpener realized the ice cream vendor wasn't going to budge and he said to watch his cart, he would be right back. After he crossed the dirt road he turned around to check that the ice cream vendor was obeying, and he saw all the flies that had been circling the vendor settle around the woman's battered head. A few women were watching from the windows across the street. Somebody needs to call an ambulance, said the knife sharpener. That woman is dying. After a while an ambulance came from the hospital and the medics wanted to know who would pay for the ride. The knife sharpener explained that he and the ice cream vendor had found the woman lying on the ground. I know, said the medic, but what I care about now is finding out who will take responsibility for her. How can I take responsibility for a person when I don't even know her name? asked the knife sharpener. Well, somebody has to, said the medic. Is there something wrong with your ears, dumbfuck? asked the knife sharpener, pulling a giant carving knife out of a drawer in his cart. Hey now, hey now, hey now, said the medic. Go on, get her in the ambulance, said the knife sharpener. The other medic, who had knelt to examine the fallen woman, swatting away the flies, said there was no point in anyone losing his shit, the woman was already dead. The knife sharpener's eyes narrowed until they looked like two lines drawn with charcoal. Goddamn motherfucking asshole, it's your fault, he said, and he started after the medic. The other medic tried to intervene, but when he saw the knife in the knife sharpener's hand, he decided to lock himself in the ambulance and call the police. For a while the knife sharpener chased the medic until his fury, exasperation, and bloodlust abated, or until he got tired. And then he stopped, took his cart, and headed off down Calle El Arroyo until the onlookers who had gathered around the ambulance lost sight of him.

The woman's name was Isabel Cansino, though she went by Elizabeth, and she was a prostitute. The blows she'd received had destroyed her spleen. The police blamed the crime on one or several dissatisfied customers. She lived in Colonia San Damián, quite a bit farther south than she'd been found, and she wasn't known to have a steady boyfriend, although a neighbor woman talked about someone called Iván who came by often, and who couldn't be located on subsequent visits. An attempt

was also made to discover the whereabouts of the knife sharpener, whose name was Nicanor, according to the statements of residents of Colonia Ciudad Nueva and Colonia Morelos, where he came around approximately once a week or once every two weeks, but all efforts to find him were in vain. Either he had changed jobs or he'd moved from the west of Santa Teresa to the south or east or he'd left the city altogether. In any case, he was never seen again.

The next month, in May, a dead woman was found in a dump between Colonia Las Flores and the General Sepúlveda industrial park. In the complex stood the buildings of four maquiladoras where household appliances were assembled. The electric towers that supplied power to the maquiladoras were new and painted silver. Next to them, amid some low hills, were the roofs of shacks that had been built a little before the arrival of the maquiladoras, stretching all the way to the train tracks and across, along the edge of Colonia La Preciada. In the plaza there were six trees, one at each corner and two in the middle, so dusty they looked yellow. At one end of the plaza was the stop for the buses that brought workers from different neighborhoods of Santa Teresa. Then it was a long walk along dirt roads to the gates where the guards checked the workers' passes, after which they were allowed into their various workplaces. Only one of the maquiladoras had a cafeteria. At the others the workers ate next to their machines or in small groups in a corner, talking and laughing until the siren sounded that signaled the end of lunch. Most were women. In the dump where the dead woman was found, the trash of the slum dwellers piled up along with the waste of the maquiladoras. The call informing the authorities of the discovery of the dead woman came from the manager of one of the plants, Multizone West, a subsidiary of a multinational that manufactured TVs. The policemen who came to get her found three executives from the maquiladora waiting for them by the dump. Two were Mexican and the other was American. One of the Mexicans said they hoped the body would be removed as soon as possible. One of the policemen asked where the body was, while his partner called an ambulance. The three executives accompanied the policeman into the dump. The four of them held their noses, but when the American stopped holding his nose the Mexicans followed his example. The dead woman had dark skin and

straight black hair past her shoulders. She was wearing a black sweat-shirt and shorts. The four men stood looking at her. The American crouched down and moved the hair from her neck with a pen. It would be better if the gringo didn't touch her, said the policeman. I'm not touching her, said the American in Spanish, I just want to see her neck. The two Mexican executives crouched down and peered at the marks on the dead woman's neck. Then they got up and looked at their watches. The ambulance is taking a long time, said one of them. It'll be here in a second, said the policeman. Well, said one of the executives, you'll take care of everything, won't you? The policeman said yes, of course, and tucked the money the other man handed him into the pocket of his regulation pants. The dead woman spent that night in a refrigerated compartment in the Santa Teresa hospital and the next day one of the medical examiner's assistants performed the autopsy. She had been strangled. She had been raped. Vaginally and anally, noted the medical examiner's assistant. And she was five months pregnant.

The first dead woman of May was never identified, so it was assumed she was a migrant from some central or southern state who had stopped in Santa Teresa on her way to the United States. No one was traveling with her, no one had reported her missing. She was approximately thirty-five years old and she was pregnant. Maybe she was going to the United States to join her husband or her lover, the father of the child she was expecting, some poor fuck who lived there illegally and maybe never knew he had gotten this woman pregnant or that she, when she found out, would come looking for him. But this first death wasn't the only one. Three days later, Guadalupe Rojas (her identity clear from the start) was killed. She was twenty-six, a resident of Calle Jazmín, one of the streets parallel to Avenida Carranza, in Colonia Carranza, and employed at the File-Sis maquiladora, recently built on the road to Nogales, some five miles from Santa Teresa. As it happened, Guadalupe Rojas didn't die on her way to work, which might have made sense, since the area around the maquiladora was deserted and dangerous, best crossed in a car and not by bus and then on foot since the factory was at least a mile from the nearest bus stop, but at the door to her building on Calle Jazmín. The cause of death was three gunshot wounds, two of them pronounced fatal. The killer turned out to be her boyfriend, who tried to

flee that very night and was caught by the train tracks, not far from a nightspot called Los Zancudos where he had gotten drunk earlier. It was the owner of the bar, a former city police officer, who called the police. Once the suspect had been questioned, it was revealed that the motive of the crime was jealousy, warranted or not, and after an appearance before the judge and upon the agreement of all present, he was sent without further delay to the Santa Teresa jail to await transfer or trial. The last dead woman of May was found on the slopes of Cerro Estrella, the hills that lend their name to the Colonia that surrounds them unevenly, as if nothing could easily grow or expand there. Only the eastern side of the hills faced mostly open country. That was where they found her. According to the medical examiner, she had been stabbed to death. There was unmistakable evidence of rape. She must have been twenty-five or twenty-six. Her skin was fair and her hair light colored. She was wearing jeans, a blue shirt, and Nike sneakers. She wasn't carrying any identifying documents. Whoever killed her had taken the trouble to dress her, because neither her jeans nor her shirt were torn. There were no indications of anal rape. The only mark on her face was a faint bruise on her upper jaw, near her right ear. In the days after the discovery, *El Herald del Norte* as well as *La Tribuna de Santa Teresa* and *La Voz de Sonora*, the three city papers, published pictures of the unknown victim of Cerro Estrella, but no one came forward to identify her. On the fourth day after her death, the Santa Teresa police chief, Pedro Negrete, went in person to Cerro Estrella, not accompanied by anyone, even Epifanio Galindo, and examined the place where the dead woman had been found. Then he left the low slopes and began to climb to the top of the Cerro. Among the volcanic rocks were supermarket bags full of trash. He remembered that his son, who was studying in Phoenix, had once told him that plastic bags took hundreds, maybe thousands of years to disintegrate. Not these, he thought, noting the rapid pace of decomposition here. At the top some children went running and vanished down the hill, toward Colonia Estrella. It began to get dark. To the west he saw houses with zinc and cardboard roofs, the streets winding through an anarchic sprawl. To the east he saw the highway that led to the mountains and the desert, the lights of the trucks, the first stars, real stars, stars that crept in with the night from the far side of the mountains. To the north he didn't see anything, just a vast monotonous plain, as if life ended beyond Santa Teresa, despite what he hoped and believed. Then he heard

dogs, the sounds coming closer and closer until he saw them. They were probably starving and wild, like the children he'd caught a glimpse of when he arrived. He pulled his gun out of his shoulder holster. He counted five dogs. He took off the safety and shot. Instead of leaping in the air, the dog collapsed, and the force of the shot sent it skidding through the dust, curled in a ball. The other four dogs ran off. Pedro Negrete watched them go. Two had their tails between their legs and ran in a crouch. Of the other two, one ran stiff tailed, and the fourth, for some unknown reason, wagged its tail, as if it had been given a treat. He went over to the dead dog and touched it with his foot. The bullet had gone into its head. Without glancing behind him he walked on down the hill, to the place where the body of the victim had been found. There he stopped and lit a cigarette. A Ducados, unfiltered. Then he continued on to his car. From here, he thought, everything looked different.

There were no other deaths of women in May, with the exception of those who died of natural causes, that is, of illness or old age, or in childbirth. But the end of the month marked the appearance of the church desecrator. One day a stranger came into the church of San Rafael, on Calle Patriotas Mexicanos, in the center of Santa Teresa, during the early service. The church was almost empty. There were just a few of the faithful clustered together in the front pews, and the priest was in the confessional. The church smelled of incense and cheap cleaning products. The stranger sat in one of the last pews and got right down on his knees, his head buried in his hands as if it ached or he felt ill. Some of the elderly parishioners turned to look at him and whispered among themselves. One little old lady came out of the confessional and stood motionless staring at the stranger, as a young woman with Indian features went in to confess. When the priest had absolved the Indian woman of her sins, the service would start. But the little old lady who had come out of the confessional just stood there staring at the stranger, although sometimes she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, doing a kind of dance step. She knew immediately that something was wrong with the man and she intended to go and warn the other old ladies. As she walked up the main aisle, she saw a pool of liquid spread across the floor from the pew where the stranger was sitting and she smelled urine. Then, instead of moving on toward where the old ladies



were clustered, she turned around and returned to the confessional. She knocked several times on the priest's little window. I'm busy, my child, he said. Father, said the little old lady, there's a man here who's polluting the house of the Lord. Yes, child, I'll be with you in a moment, said the priest. Father, I don't like this one bit, do something, for the love of God. As she talked, the little old lady seemed to dance. I'm coming, my child, be patient, I'm busy, said the priest. Father, there's a man doing his business in the church, said the little old lady. The priest poked his head out between the threadbare curtains and peered through the sepia dusk at the stranger, and then he stepped out of the confessional and the woman with Indian features also stepped out of the confessional and the three of them stood frozen watching the stranger who was moaning faintly and kept urinating, wetting his pants and loosing a river of urine that ran toward the vestibule, confirming that the aisle, as the priest had feared, was worryingly uneven. Then the priest went to call the sexton, who was having his coffee at the sacristy table and looked tired, and the two of them went up to the stranger to scold him and throw him out of the church. The stranger saw them coming and gazed at them with his eyes full of tears and asked them to leave him alone. Almost at the same moment, a blade appeared in his hand, and as the old ladies in the front pews screamed, he stabbed the sexton.

The case was entrusted to Inspector Juan de Dios Martínez, who was reputed to be capable and discreet, a quality some policemen associated with religious faith. Juan de Dios Martínez talked to the priest, who described the stranger as a man of about thirty, average height, dark-skinned, sturdy, your average Mexican. Then he talked to the old ladies. To them, the stranger was no average Mexican, he was the devil incarnate. So what was the devil doing at the early service? asked the inspector. He was there to kill us all, said the old ladies. At two in the afternoon, accompanied by a sketch artist, Juan de Dios Martínez went to the hospital to take the sexton's statement. The sexton's description matched the priest's. The stranger smelled of liquor. The smell was strong, as if he had washed his shirt the night before in a basin of ninety-proof alcohol. He hadn't shaved for days, although you couldn't really tell because he didn't have much of a beard. How did the sexton know he didn't have much of a beard? Juan de Dios Martínez wanted to know. By

the way the hairs grew on his face, skimpy and every which way, like they were stuck there in the dark by his bitch of a mother and his cocksucking faggot of a father, said the sexton. Also: he had big, strong hands. Hands maybe too big for his body. And he was crying, no question about that, but he also seemed to be laughing, crying and laughing at the same time. Do you know what I mean? asked the sexton. Like he was high? asked the inspector. Exactly. That's it. Later Juan de Dios Martínez called the Santa Teresa asylum and asked whether they had an inmate who matched the description he had compiled. They said they had two, but neither was violent. He asked if they were allowed out. One is and the other isn't, he was told. I'm coming to see them, said the inspector. At five, after eating lunch at a coffee shop where cops never went, Juan de Dios Martínez parked his metallic gray Cougar in the asylum parking lot. He was received by the director, a woman of about fifty, with her hair dyed blond, who had coffee brought in for him. The director's office was pretty and struck him as tastefully decorated. On the walls there were two prints, a Picasso and a Diego Rivera. Juan de Dios Martínez spent a long time gazing at the Rivera print as he waited for the director. On the desk were two photographs: one was of the director, when she was younger, with her arms around a girl looking straight into the camera. The girl had a sweet, blank expression on her face. In the other photograph the director was even younger. She was sitting next to an older woman, regarding her with an amused expression. The older woman had a serious air about her and stared at the camera as if she thought it was frivolous to have her picture taken. When the director came in at last, the inspector could see immediately that many years had gone by since the pictures were taken. He observed further that the director was still very attractive. For a while they talked about the mental patients. The dangerous ones weren't allowed out, the director informed him. And there weren't many dangerous ones, anyway. The inspector showed her the sketch the artist had made and the director examined it carefully for a few seconds. Juan de Dios Martínez stared at her hands. Her nails were painted and her fingers were long and looked soft to the touch. On the back of her hands he counted a few freckles. The director said the sketch wasn't good and it might be anyone. Then they went to see the two patients. They were in the yard, an enormous yard with no trees, a dirt yard like a soccer field in a slum. A guard dressed in white T-shirt and trousers brought out the first inmate. Juan de Dios Martínez

heard the director ask how he felt. Then they talked about food. The patient said he could hardly eat meat anymore, but he said it in such a scattered way that the inspector couldn't tell whether he was complaining about the menu or informing the director of a recently acquired aversion. She talked about protein. The breeze in the yard ruffled the patients' hair. We need to build a wall, he heard the doctor say. When the wind blows it makes them nervous, said the guard dressed in white. Then they brought out the other inmate. Juan de Dios Martínez thought at first that they were brothers, although when the two were side by side he realized the resemblance was deceptive. From a distance, he thought, maybe all madmen look alike. Back in the director's office, he asked how long she'd been the head of the asylum. For ages, she said, laughing. I can't even remember how long. As they drank more coffee, of which the director was clearly very fond, he asked if she was from Santa Teresa. No, said the director. I was born in Guadalupe and I studied in Mexico City and then in San Francisco, at Berkeley. Juan de Dios Martínez would have liked to keep talking and drinking coffee, and maybe ask whether she was married or divorced, but he didn't have time. Can I take them with me? he asked. The director looked at him uncomprehendingly. Can I take the patients with me? he asked. The director laughed in his face and asked if he was right in the head. Where do you want to take them? To be part of a kind of lineup, said the inspector. The victim is in the hospital and can't go anywhere. You lend me your patients for a few hours, I'll take them on a ride to the hospital, and you'll have them back before dark. You're asking me? said the director. You're the boss, said the inspector. Bring me a court order from the judge, said the director. I can get one, but it's just red tape. Also, if I come with a court order, your patients will be brought in to the station, they might be kept a night or two, it won't be any fun for them. But if I take them with me now, it'll be easy. They ride in the car with me, I'm the only cop, and if the victim makes a positive identification, you still get your boys back, both of them. Doesn't that seem easier? No, not to me it doesn't, said the director, bring me a court order from the judge and then we'll see. I didn't mean to offend you, said the inspector. I'm shocked, said the director. Juan de Dios Martínez laughed. Well, I won't take them, then, and that's the end of it, he said. But will you promise to do your best to make sure neither of them leaves the asylum? The director got up and for a moment he thought she was going to kick him out. Then she called

her secretary and asked for another cup of coffee. Would you like one? Juan de Dios Martínez nodded. Tonight I won't be able to sleep, he thought.

That night the stranger from San Rafael found his way to the church of San Tadeo, in Colonia Kino, a neighborhood springing up amid the scrub and rolling hills of southeastern Santa Teresa. Inspector Juan de Dios Martínez got a call at midnight. He was watching TV and after he hung up he collected the dirty plates on the table and put them in the sink. From the drawer of the night table he took his gun and the sketch, which he had folded in four, and went down the steps to the garage where his red Chevy Astra was parked. When he got to San Tadeo some women were sitting on the adobe steps. There weren't many of them. Inside the church he caught a glimpse of Inspector José Márquez questioning the priest. He asked a policeman whether the ambulance had come yet. The policeman looked at him with a smile and said there were no casualties. What the fuck was all this? Two crime scene technicians were trying to find prints on a statue of Christ next to the altar, on the floor. This time the freak didn't hurt anyone, José Márquez told him when he was done with the priest. Juan de Dios Martínez wanted to know what had happened. Some tripped-out asshole showed up here around ten, said Márquez. He was carrying a switchblade or a knife. He sat in the last row. There. Where it's darkest. An old woman heard him crying. Because he was sad or happy, I don't know. He was peeing. Then the old woman went to call the priest and he jumped up and started to smash statues. Christ, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and a couple of other saints. Then he left. And that's all? asked Inspector Juan de Dios Martínez. End of story, said Márquez. For a while the two of them talked to the witnesses. The description of the perpetrator matched the description of the perpetrator at San Rafael. Juan de Dios Martínez showed the priest the sketch. The priest was young and seemed tired, not because of what had happened that night but because of something that had been wearing him down for years. Looks like him, the priest said indifferently. The church smelled of incense and urine. The chunks of plaster scattered across the floor reminded him of a movie, but he couldn't remember which one. With the tip of his foot he nudged one of the fragments. It looked like a piece of a hand and it was soaked. Have

you noticed? asked Márquez. What? asked Juan de Dios Martínez. The bastard must have a huge bladder. Or else he holds it as long as he can and waits until he's inside a church to let go. When Juan de Dios Martínez came out, he saw some reporters from *El Heraldito del Norte* and *La Tribuna de Santa Teresa* talking to bystanders. He went for a walk through the nearby streets. It didn't smell of incense there, although at times the air seemed to waft directly from a septic tank. The streets were barely lit. I've never been here before, Juan de Dios Martínez said to himself. At the end of the street he spotted the shadow of a big tree. It stood in a poor imitation of a plaza, the tree the only thing that gave the barren semicircle any resemblance to a public space. Around the tree were some clumsily built benches where the neighborhood residents could sit and get a breath of fresh air. There used to be an Indian settlement here, remembered the inspector. A policeman who'd lived in the colonia had told him so. He dropped onto a bench and gazed up at the imposing shadow of the tree silhouetted menacingly against the starry sky. Where are the Indians now? He thought about the director of the asylum. He would've liked to talk to her just then, but he knew he wouldn't dare call her.

The attacks on San Rafael and San Tadeo got more attention in the local press than the women killed in the preceding months. The next day, Juan de Dios Martínez and two policemen went back to Colonia Kino and Colonia La Preciada and showed people the sketch of the attacker. No one recognized him. At lunchtime the policemen went downtown and Juan de Dios Martínez called the director of the asylum. The director hadn't read the papers and didn't know anything about what had happened the night before. Juan de Dios asked her out to lunch. Unexpectedly, the director accepted the invitation and they agreed to meet at a vegetarian restaurant on Calle Río Usamacinta, in Colonia Podestá. He'd never been to the restaurant, and when he got there he asked for a table for two and a whiskey while he waited, but they didn't serve alcohol. The waiter was wearing a checkered shirt and sandals and looked at him as if something was wrong with him or he'd come to the wrong restaurant. It was a nice place, he thought. The people at the other tables talked in low voices and there was the sound of music like water tumbling over smooth stones. The director saw him as soon as she

came in, but she didn't say hello. She went to talk to the waiter, who was preparing fresh-squeezed juice behind the bar. After exchanging a few words with him, she came over to the table. She was wearing gray pants and a low-cut pearl-colored sweater. Juan de Dios Martínez got up when she reached him and thanked her for agreeing to have lunch with him. The director smiled: she had small, even teeth, very white and sharp, which made her smile look carnivorous in a way that was out of keeping with the restaurant. The waiter asked what they wanted to eat. Juan de Dios Martínez looked at the menu and then said she should choose for him. As they were waiting for their food he told her about San Tadeo. The director listened carefully and at the end she asked if there was anything else. That's the whole story, said the inspector. My two patients spent the night at the center, she said. I know, he said. How? After I left the church I went to the asylum. I asked the guard and the nurse on duty to take me to their rooms. Both were asleep. There were no urinated clothes. No one let them out. What you're describing is illegal, said the director. But now they aren't suspects anymore, said the inspector. And I didn't even wake them up. They didn't realize a thing. For a while the director ate in silence. Juan de Dios Martínez was beginning to like the water-sounds music more and more. He told her so. I'd like to buy the album, he said. He meant it sincerely. The director seemed not to hear him. For dessert they were served figs. Juan de Dios Martínez said it had been years since he ate figs. The director ordered a coffee and wanted to pay for the meal herself, but he wouldn't let her. It wasn't easy. He had to insist more than once, and the director seemed to turn to stone. When they left the restaurant they shook hands as if they would never see each other again.

Two days later, the stranger got into the church of Santa Catalina, in Colonia Lomas del Toro, late at night when the building was closed, and he urinated and defecated on the altar, as well as decapitating almost all the statues in his path. This time, the story made the national news and a reporter from *La Voz de Sonora* dubbed the attacker the Demon Penitent. As far as Juan de Dios Martínez knew, the culprit might be anyone, but the police decided it had been the Penitent and he thought it best to go along with the official story. It didn't strike him as odd that nobody living near the church had heard anything, even though it would have

taken time to break all those sacred objects and would've made lots of noise. No one lived at the church. The officiating priest was there from nine in the morning till one in the afternoon, and then he went to work at a parochial school in Colonia Ciudad Nueva. There was no sexton and the altar boys who helped at Mass sometimes came and sometimes didn't. In fact, Santa Catalina was a church with almost no parishioners, and the things inside were cheap, bought by the diocese at a store downtown that sold cassocks and saints, wholesale and retail. The priest was an open-minded man, a freethinker, or so it seemed to Juan de Dios Martínez. They talked for a while. There was nothing missing from the church. The priest didn't seem scandalized or upset by the outrage. He made a rapid calculation of the damages and said that for the diocese it was a drop in the bucket. He wasn't startled by the shit on the altar. After you leave this will all be cleaned up in a few hours, he said. But the quantity of urine alarmed him. Shoulder to shoulder, like Siamese twins, the inspector and the priest examined every corner where the Penitent had urinated, and the priest said at last that the man must have a bladder the size of a watermelon. That night, Juan de Dios Martínez thought to himself that he was beginning to like the Penitent. The first attack was violent and the sexton was almost killed, but as the days went by he was perfecting his technique. With the second attack he had only frightened some churchgoers, and with the third no one saw him and he was able to work in peace.

Three days after the desecration of the church of Santa Catalina, in the early morning hours, the Penitent slipped into the church of Nuestro Señor Jesucristo, in Colonia Reforma, the oldest church in the city, built in the mid-eighteenth century and once the seat of the diocese of Santa Teresa. Three priests and two young Pápago Indian seminarians who were studying anthropology and history at the University of Santa Teresa slept in an adjacent building, located at the corner of Calle Soler and Calle Ortiz Rubio. In addition to pursuing their studies, the seminarians performed some minor cleaning tasks, like washing the dishes each night or gathering up the priests' dirty laundry and delivering the load to the woman who did the washing. That night, one of the seminarians wasn't asleep. He had tried to study in his room and then he got up to get a book from the library, where, for no reason, he sat reading in an

armchair until he fell asleep. The building was connected to the church by a passageway that led straight to the rectory office. It was said that there was another underground passageway that the priests had used during the Revolution and the Cristero War, but the Pápago student had never heard of it. Suddenly he was woken by the sound of breaking glass. First, oddly enough, he thought it was raining, but then he realized the noise was coming from inside the church, not outside, and he went to investigate. When he got to the rectory office he heard moans and he thought someone had gotten locked inside one of the confessionals, which was entirely unlikely, since the doors didn't lock. The Pápago student, despite what was commonly believed about people of his ancestry, wasn't brave at all and was afraid to go into the church alone. First he went to wake up the other seminarian and then the two of them knocked very discreetly at the door of Father Juan Carrasco, who at that hour was asleep, like everybody else in the building. Father Juan Carrasco listened to the Pápago's story in the hallway and since he read the news he said: it must be the Penitent. Immediately he went back into his room, put on pants and sneakers that he wore to go jogging or to play *frontón*, and got an old baseball bat out of a cupboard. Then he sent one of the Pápagos to wake up the caretaker, who slept in a little room on the first floor, next to the stairs, and, followed by the Pápago who had raised the alert, he headed for the church. At first glance both had the impression that no one was there. The opalescent smoke of the candles rose slowly toward the vaulted ceiling and a dense, tawny cloud hovered motionless inside the sanctuary. A moment later they heard the moan, like a child trying not to vomit, then another and another, and then the familiar sound of the first retch. It's the Penitent, whispered the seminarian. Father Carrasco furrowed his brow and headed resolutely toward the place the noise was coming from, gripping the baseball bat in two hands, as if he were about to step up to the plate. The Pápago didn't follow him. Maybe he took a small step or two in the direction the priest had gone, but then he stood still, prey to a divine terror. Even his teeth were chattering. He could neither advance nor retreat. So, as he later explained to the police, he began to pray. What did you pray? asked Inspector Juan de Dios Martínez. The Pápago didn't understand the question. The Lord's Prayer? asked the inspector. No, oh no, my mind went blank, said the Pápago, I prayed for my soul, I prayed to the Holy Mother, I begged the Holy Mother not to abandon me. From where he

was he heard the sound of the baseball bat slamming against a column. It might have been (he thought or he remembered having thought) the Penitent's spinal column or the six-foot column on which stood the wooden carving of the Archangel Gabriel. Then he heard someone panting. He heard the Penitent moan. He heard Father Carrasco swear at someone, but the words were strange, and he couldn't tell whether it was the Penitent who was being sworn at, or he himself for not following, or an unknown person from Father Carrasco's past, someone the Pápago would never know and the priest would never see again. Then came the sound of a baseball bat dropping on stones cut with skill and precision. The wood, the bat, bounced several times until at last the noise ceased. Almost at the same instant he heard the scream, which brought back the sense of divine terror. Unthinking terror. Or a terror expressed in shaky images. Then he thought he saw, as if by candlelight, though it might just as easily have been a ray of lightning, the figure of the Penitent shattering the shinbones of the archangel in a single blow and knocking it off its pedestal with the baseball bat. Again the sound of wood, this time very old wood, hitting stone, as if in that place wood and stone were strictly antagonistic terms. And more blows. And then the footsteps of the caretaker, who came running and plunged into the darkness too, and the voice of his Pápago brother asking him, in Pápago, what was wrong, what hurt. And then more shouting and more priests and voices calling for the police and a flurry of white shirts and an acid smell, as if someone had mopped the stones of the old church with a gallon of ammonia, the smell of piss, as he was informed by Inspector Juan de Dios Martínez, too much urine for one man, for a man with a normal bladder.

This time the Penitent went berserk, said Inspector José Márquez as he knelt to look at the bodies of Father Carrasco and the caretaker. Juan de Dios Martínez examined the window the Penitent had come in through and then he went outside and spent a while walking along Calle Soler and then Calle Ortiz Rubio and through a plaza the residents used as free parking at night. When he got back to the church, Pedro Negrete and Epifanio were there, and as soon as he came in the police chief motioned for him to join them. For a while they talked and smoked sitting in the last row of pews. Under his leather jacket Negrete was wearing a

pajama shirt. He smelled of expensive cologne and he didn't seem tired. Epifanio was wearing a light blue suit that looked good in the dim light of the church. Juan de Dios Martínez told the police chief the Penitent must have a car. What makes you say that? He can't get around on foot without attracting attention, said the inspector. His piss stinks. It's a long way from Kino to Reforma. It's a long way from Reforma to Lomas del Toro, too. Let's say the Penitent lives downtown. You could walk downtown from Reforma, and if it was nighttime, no one would notice you smelled like piss. But to walk downtown from Lomas del Toro, that would take, I don't know, at least an hour. Or more, said Epifanio. And how far is it from Lomas del Toro to Kino? At least forty-five minutes, assuming you don't get lost, said Epifanio. And that's not to mention Reforma to Kino, said Juan de Dios Martínez. So the bastard gets around by car, said the police chief. It's the only thing we can be sure of, said Juan de Dios Martínez. And he probably carries a change of clothes in the car. What for? asked the police chief. As a safety precaution. So in other words you think the Penitent is nobody's fool, said Negrete. He only goes crazy when he's in a church, when he comes out he's just like anybody else, whispered Juan de Dios Martínez. Goddamn, said the police chief. What do you think, Epifanio? Could be, said Epifanio. If he lives alone, he can come back smelling like shit, since it doesn't take him more than a minute to get from his car to his base of operations. If he's got some woman at home or his folks, he must change his clothes before he goes in. Makes sense, said the police chief. But the question is how we stop all this. Any ideas? For now, station an officer in each church and wait for the Penitent to make his next move, said Juan de Dios Martínez. My brother's a churchgoer, said the police chief, as if thinking out loud. I have to ask him a few things. What about you, Juan de Dios, where do you think the Penitent lives? I don't know, Chief, said the inspector, anywhere, although if he has a car I doubt he lives in Kino.

At five in the morning, when Inspector Juan de Dios Martínez got home, there was a message from the asylum director on his answering machine. The person you're looking for, said the director's voice, is sacrophobic. Call me and I'll explain. Late as it was, he called her right away. The director's recorded voice answered. Martínez here, from the Policía Judicial, said Juan de Dios Martínez, sorry to call so early . . . I got your message . . . I just got in . . . Tonight the Penitent . . . Anyway, I'll call you tomorrow . . . Or today, I guess . . . Good night and thanks for the mes-

sage. Then he took off his shoes and pants and fell into bed, but he couldn't sleep. By six he was at the station. A group of patrolmen were celebrating the birthday of a colleague and they offered him a drink, but he said no. From the offices of the judicial police inspectors, which were empty, he heard them singing "Happy Birthday" over and over again on the floor above. He made a list of the officers he wanted to work with him. He wrote a report for the Hermosillo office and then he stood out by the vending machine and drank a cup of coffee. He watched two patrolmen come down the stairs with their arms around each other and he followed them. In the hallway he saw several cops talking, in groups of two, three, four. Every so often one group laughed loudly. A man dressed in white, but wearing jeans, pushed a stretcher. On the stretcher, covered in a gray plastic sheet, lay the body of Emilia Mena Mena. Nobody noticed.

Emilia Mena Mena died in June. Her body was found in the illegal dump near Calle Yucatecos, on the way to the Hermanos Corinto brick factory. The medical examiner's report stated that she had been raped, stabbed, and burned, without specifying whether the stab wounds or the burns had been the cause of death, and without specifying whether Emilia Mena Mena was already dead when the burns were inflicted. Fires were constantly being reported in the dump where she was found, most of them set on purpose, others flaring up by chance, so there was some possibility the body had been charred by a random blaze, not set alight by the murderer. The dump didn't have a formal name, because it wasn't supposed to be there, but it had an informal name: it was called El Chile. During the day there wasn't a soul to be seen in El Chile or the surrounding fields soon to be swallowed up by the dump. At night those who had nothing or less than nothing ventured out. In Mexico City they call them *teporochos*, but a *teporoch* is a survivor, a cynic and a humorist, compared to the human beings who swarmed alone or in pairs around El Chile. There weren't many of them. They spoke a slang that was hard to understand. The police conducted a roundup the night after the body of Emilia Mena Mena was found and all they brought in was three children hunting for cardboard in the trash. The night residents of El Chile were few. Their life expectancy was short. They died after seven months, at most, of picking their way through the dump. Their feeding habits and their sex lives were a mystery. It was likely they had forgotten how to eat or fuck. Or that food and sex were beyond their

reach by then, unattainable, indescribable, beyond action and expression. All, without exception, were sick. To strip the clothes from a body in El Chile was to skin it. The population was stable: never fewer than three, never more than twenty.

The main suspect in the killing of Emilia Mena Mena was her boyfriend. When the police came looking for him at the house where he lived with his parents and three brothers, he was already gone. According to the family he had gotten on a bus a day or two before the body was found. The father and two brothers spent a few days in a cell, but the only coherent information that could be extracted from them was the address of the father's brother, in Ciudad Guzmán, the suspect's ostensible destination. When the police in Ciudad Guzmán were alerted, some officers made a visit to the residence in question, equipped with the necessary warrants, but they found no trace of the alleged boyfriend and killer. The case remained open and was soon forgotten. Five days later, while the investigation was still unconcluded, the janitor at Morelos Preparatory School found the body of another dead woman. It was on a piece of ground where the students sometimes played soccer and baseball, a field with a view of Arizona and the shells of the maquiladoras on the Mexican side of the border and the dirt roads leading from the factories to the network of paved roads. Along one side, separated from the field by a barbed-wire fence, were the school yards, and farther off were the two three-story school buildings, where classes were taught in big, sunny rooms. The school had opened in 1990 and the janitor had been there since the beginning. He was the first to arrive each morning and one of the last to leave. The morning he found the dead woman, something caught his attention while he was picking up the master keys from the principal's office. At first he wasn't sure what it was. By the time he came into the supply room he realized. Buzzards. Buzzards were flying over the field next to the yard. But he still had plenty to do, and he decided to investigate later. Shortly afterward, the cook and the kitchen boy arrived, and he went to have coffee with them in the kitchen. They talked for ten minutes about the usual things, until the janitor asked if they had seen buzzards over the school when they came in. Both of them answered that they hadn't. Then the janitor finished his coffee and said he was going to take a walk out to the field. He was afraid he would find a dead dog. If he did, he would have to come back to the school, to

the room where the tools were kept, and get a shovel and go back to the field and bury the dog deep enough so the students wouldn't dig it up. But what he found was a woman. She was dressed in a black shirt and black shoes and her skirt was rolled up around her waist. She didn't have anything on underneath. That was the first thing he saw. Then he got a look at her face and saw she hadn't died that night. One of the buzzards landed on the fence but he shooped it off. The woman had long black hair at least halfway down her back. Some strands were stuck together with coagulated blood. On her stomach and between her legs there was dried blood. He crossed himself twice and stood up slowly. When he got back to the school he told the cook what had happened. The kitchen boy was scrubbing a pot and the janitor spoke in a low voice, so he wouldn't hear. He called the principal from the office, but the principal had already left home. He found a blanket and went to cover up the dead woman. Only then did he realize a stake had been driven straight through her. His eyes filled with tears as he returned to the school. The cook was there, sitting in the yard, smoking a cigarette. She made a gesture as if to ask how it had gone. The janitor responded with another gesture, impossible to decipher, and went out to wait for the principal by the main door. When he arrived they both went out to the field. From the yard the cook watched as the principal lifted one side of the blanket and stared from different angles at the scarcely visible shape on the ground. A little later they were joined by two teachers, and, about thirty feet away, by a group of students. At noon, two police cars, a third, unmarked car, and an ambulance arrived, and the dead woman was taken away. Her name was never learned. The medical examiner stated that she had been dead for several days, without specifying how many. The stab wounds to the chest were the probable cause of death, but the examiner couldn't rule out a fractured skull as the principal cause. The dead woman was probably somewhere between twenty-three and twenty-five. She was five feet seven inches tall.

The last dead woman to be discovered in June 1993 was Margarita López Santos. She had disappeared more than forty days before. The second day she was gone, her mother filed a report at Precinct #2. Margarita López worked at K&T, a maquiladora in the El Progreso industrial park near the Nogales highway and the last houses of Colonia Guadalupe Victoria. The day of her disappearance she was working the

third shift at the maquiladora, from nine at night to five in the morning. According to her fellow workers, she had come in on time, as always, because Margarita was more dependable and responsible than most, which meant that her disappearance could be fixed around the time of the shift change and her walk home. But no one saw anything then, in part because it was dark at five or five-thirty in the morning, and there wasn't enough public lighting. Most of the houses in the northern part of Colonia Guadalupe Victoria had no electricity. The roads out of the industrial park, except the one leading to the Nogales highway, also lacked adequate lighting, paving, and drainage systems: almost all the waste from the park ended up in Colonia Las Rositas, where it formed a lake of mud that bleached white in the sun. So Margarita López left work at five-thirty. That much was established. And then she set out along the dark streets of the industrial park. Maybe she saw the pickup that parked each night in an empty plaza next to the parking lot of the WS-Inc. maquiladora, a truck that sold coffee and soft drinks and different kinds of sandwiches to the workers on their way into or out of work. Most of them women. But she wasn't hungry or she knew there was a meal waiting for her at home and she didn't stop. She left the park and the ever more distant glow of the lights of the maquiladoras. She crossed the Nogales highway and turned down the first streets of Colonia Guadalupe Victoria. Crossing Guadalupe Victoria would take her no more than half an hour. Then she would be in Colonia San Bartolomé, where she lived. All in all, a fifty-minute walk, more or less. But somewhere along the way something happened or something went permanently wrong and afterward her mother was told there was a chance she had run off with a man. She's only sixteen, said her mother, and she's a good girl. Forty days later some children found her body near a shack in Colonia Maytorena. Her left hand rested on some guaco leaves. Due to the state of the body, the medical examiner was unable to determine the cause of death. One of the policemen present at the removal of the body, however, was able to identify the guaco plant. It's good for mosquito bites, he said, crouching down and plucking some little green leaves, pointed and tough.

There were no deaths in July. None in August either.

Around this time the Mexico City newspaper *La Razón* sent Sergio González to write a story on the Penitent. Sergio González was thirty-five and recently divorced, and he was looking to make money any way he could. Normally he wouldn't have accepted the assignment, because he was an arts writer, not a crime reporter. He wrote reviews of philosophy books that no one read, not the books or his reviews, and sometimes he wrote about art shows or music. He had been on staff at *La Razón* for four years and his financial situation was acceptable, if not comfortable, until the divorce, when suddenly he was in constant need of money. Since there was nothing else he could write for his own section (where he sometimes used a pseudonym so readers wouldn't be able to tell that all the articles were his), he badgered the editors of the other sections to give him extra assignments to help boost his income. Hence the proposal to travel to Santa Teresa and write the story of the Penitent. The person who offered him the story was the editor of the paper's Sunday magazine, who held González in high regard and thought that with his offer he would kill two birds with one stone: on the one hand, González would make some money, and on the other hand, he could take three or four days of vacation up north, somewhere with good food and clean air, and forget about his wife. So in July 1993, Sergio González flew to Hermosillo and took the bus to Santa Teresa. And in fact, the change of scene suited him perfectly. Hermosillo's bright blue skies, almost a metallic blue, lit from beneath, cheered him up instantly. The people in the airport and later on the city streets struck him as friendly, relaxed, as if he were in a foreign country and seeing only the good side of its inhabitants. In Santa Teresa, which he thought of as a hardworking city with very little unemployment, he got a room at a cheap hotel called El Oasis in the center of town, on a street where the paving stones dated back to the time of the Reform, and a little later he visited the offices of *El Heraldo del Norte* and *La Voz de Sonora* and spoke at length with the reporters who were covering the story of the Penitent. They told him how to get to the desecrated churches, which he visited in a single day, in the company of a taxi driver who waited for him out front. He managed to talk to two priests, at San Tadeo and Santa Catalina, who had little new to add, although the priest at Santa Catalina suggested he take a good look around, because in his opinion the church-desecrator-turned-killer wasn't the worst scourge of Santa Teresa. The police let him have a copy of the sketch of the perpetrator and he made an appointment to talk to

Juan de Dios Martínez, the inspector in charge of the case. In the afternoon he talked to the mayor, who invited him to lunch at the restaurant next door to the city council building, a restaurant with stone walls that strove and failed to look colonial. But the food was very good, and the mayor and two other lower-ranking members of the city administration made it their business to keep things lively with gossip and dirty jokes. The next day he tried to interview the chief of police, but it was a staff member who met with him, probably the police department's press officer, a kid straight out of law school who handed him a folder with all the information a reporter might need to write a story about the Penitent. The kid's last name was Zamudio and he had nothing better to do that night than keep Sergio González company. They had dinner together. Then they went to a club. Sergio González couldn't remember having been in a club since he was seventeen years old. He told Zamudio, who laughed. They bought drinks for lots of girls. The girls were from Sinaloa and it was immediately clear by their clothes that they were factory workers. Sergio González asked one girl he ended up with whether she liked to dance, and she said she liked it more than anything in the world. The answer struck him as illuminating, though he couldn't say why, and also devastatingly sad. In turn, the girl asked him what a *chilango* from Mexico City was doing in Santa Teresa, and he said he was a reporter and he was writing a story on the Penitent. She didn't seem impressed by the revelation. She had never read *La Razón* either, which González found hard to believe. At some point, Zamudio took him aside and said they could sleep with the girls. Zamudio's face was distorted by the strobe lights and he looked like a madman. González shrugged.

The next day he woke up alone in his hotel room with the sensation of having seen or heard something forbidden. Or at least inappropriate, awkward. He tried to interview Juan de Dios Martínez. The only people in the office were two men playing dice, while a third watched. All three were judicial police inspectors. Sergio González introduced himself and then sat down in a chair to wait, since they'd told him that Juan de Dios Martínez would be in soon. The inspectors were dressed in warm-up jackets and sweats. Each of the players had a cup of beans and at each toss of the dice they took a few beans out of their respective cups and placed them in the middle of the table. It seemed strange to González



that grown men would bet with beans, but even stranger when he saw that some of the beans in the middle of the table were jumping. He looked carefully, and it was true, every so often one or sometimes two of the beans jumped, not very high, maybe half an inch or a quarter of an inch, but they really were jumping. The players paid no attention to the beans. They dropped the dice, of which there were five, into the barrel, shook it, and, with a sharp knock, spilled them onto the table. At each throw, they spoke words González didn't understand. They said: *engarróteseme ahí*, or *metateado*, or *peladeaje*, or *combiliado*, or *biscornieto*, or *bola de pinole*, or *despatolado*, or *sin desperdicio*, as if they were uttering the names of gods or steps in a ceremony that even they didn't understand but everyone had to obey. The inspector who wasn't playing wagged his head in unison. Sergio González asked if the beans were jumping beans. The inspector looked at him and nodded. I've never seen so many, he said. In fact, he had never even seen one. When Juan de Dios Martínez came in, the inspectors kept playing. Juan de Dios Martínez was wearing a gray suit, slightly wrinkled, and a dark green tie. They sat down at a desk, which from what González could see was the neatest in the office, and talked about the Penitent. According to the inspector, although he asked that this be off the record, the Penitent was sick. What kind of sickness does he have? whispered González, realizing as they spoke that Juan de Dios Martínez didn't want his colleagues to hear. Sacraphobia, said the inspector. And what's that? asked González. Fear and hatred of sacred objects, said the inspector. According to him, the Penitent didn't desecrate churches with the premeditated intent to kill. The deaths were accidental. The Penitent just wanted to vent his rage on the images of the saints.

It wasn't long before the churches desecrated by the Penitent were fixed up and the damages fully repaired, except at Santa Catalina, which for a while remained just as the Penitent had left it. We need money for many things, Sergio González was told by the Ciudad Nueva priest who came once a day to Colonia Lomas del Toro to say Mass and clean, his words implying that there were higher or more urgent priorities than the replacement of the sacred objects that had been destroyed. It was thanks to this priest, the second and last time they met at the church, that Sergio González learned that crimes other than the Penitent's were

being committed in Santa Teresa, crimes against women, still mostly unsolved. For a while, as he swept, the priest talked and talked: about the city, about the trickle of Central American immigrants, about the hundreds of Mexicans who arrived each day in search of work at the maquiladoras or hoping to cross the border, about the human trafficking by *polleros* and *coyotes*, about the starvation wages paid at the factories, about how those wages were still coveted by the desperate who arrived from Querétaro or Zacatecas or Oaxaca, desperate Christians, said the priest (which was an odd way to describe them, especially for a priest), who embarked on the most incredible journeys, sometimes alone and sometimes with their families in tow, until they reached the border and only then did they rest or cry or pray or get drunk or get high or dance until they fell down exhausted. The priest sounded like he was chanting a litany, and for a moment, as he listened, Sergio González closed his eyes and nearly fell asleep. Later they went outside and sat on the brick steps of the church. The priest offered him a Camel and they smoked, gazing at the horizon. So besides being a reporter, what other things do you do in Mexico City? the priest asked. For a few seconds, as he breathed in the smoke of his cigarette, Sergio González thought about what to answer and couldn't come up with anything. I just got divorced, he said, and I read a lot. What kind of books? the priest wanted to know. Philosophy, more than anything, said González. Do you like to read, too? A couple of girls came running by and greeted the priest by name, without stopping. González watched them cut through a lot where big red flowers were blooming and then cross a street. Of course, said the priest. What kind of books? asked González. Liberation theology, especially, said the priest. I like Boff and the Brazilians. But I read detective novels, too. González got up and stubbed out his cigarette on the sole of his shoe. It's been a pleasure, he said. The priest shook his hand and nodded.

The next morning, Sergio González took the bus to Hermosillo and then, after a four-hour wait, flew back to Mexico City. Two days later he filed his story on the Penitent with the Sunday magazine editor and promptly forgot the whole business.

What is sacrophobia exactly? Juan de Dios Martínez asked the director. Teach me a little about it. The director said her name was Elvira Campos and she ordered a whiskey. Juan de Dios Martínez ordered a beer and glanced around the bar. On the terrace an accordion player, followed by a violinist, was trying in vain to attract the attention of a man dressed like a rancher. A *narco*, thought Juan de Dios Martínez, although since the man had his back to him, he couldn't say who it was. Sacrophobia is fear or hatred of the sacred, of sacred objects, especially from your own religion, said Elvira Campos. He thought about making a reference to Dracula, who fled crucifixes, but he was afraid the director would laugh at him. And you believe the Penitent suffers from sacrophobia? I've given it some thought, and I do. A few days ago he disemboweled a priest and another person, said Juan de Dios Martínez. The accordion player was very young, twenty at most, and round as an apple. The way he held himself, however, made him look at least twenty-five, except when he smiled, which was often, and then all of a sudden it was clear how young and inexperienced he was. He doesn't carry the knife to hurt anyone, any living thing, I mean, but to destroy the sacred images he finds in churches, said the director. Shall we call each other by our first names? Juan de Dios Martínez asked her. Elvira Campos smiled and nodded. You're a very attractive woman, said Juan de Dios Martínez. Thin and attractive. You don't like thin women, Inspector? asked the director. The violinist was taller than the accordionist and she was wearing a black blouse and black leggings. She had long straight hair down to her waist and sometimes she closed her eyes, especially when the accordionist sang and played. The saddest thing, thought Juan de Dios Martínez, was that the *narco*, or the suited back of the man he thought was a *narco*, was hardly paying any attention to them, busy as he was talking to a man with the face of a mongoose and a hooker with the face of a cat. Weren't we going to call each other by our first names? asked Juan de Dios Martínez. You're right, said the director. So are you sure the Penitent suffers from sacrophobia? The director said she'd been looking through the archives at the asylum to see whether she could find some former patient with a case history like the Penitent's. She hadn't come up with anything. If he's as old as you say he is, I'd guess he's been institutionalized at some point. The accordion player suddenly started to stamp in time to the music. From where they were sitting they couldn't hear him, but he was making faces, working his mouth and eyebrows,

and then he ruffled his hair with one hand and seemed to howl with laughter. The violinist had her eyes closed. The *narco's* head swiveled. Juan de Dios Martínez thought to himself that the boy had finally gotten what he wanted. There's probably a file on him in some psychiatric center in Hermosillo or Tijuana. It can't be such a rare case. Maybe he was on medication until recently. Maybe he stopped taking it, said the director. Are you married, do you live with anyone? asked Juan de Dios Martínez in an almost inaudible voice. I live alone, said the director. But you have children, I saw the pictures in your office. I have a daughter, she's married. Juan de Dios Martínez felt something release inside of him and he laughed. Don't tell me you're already a grandmother. That's not the kind of thing you say to a woman, Inspector. How old are you? asked the director. Thirty-four, said Juan de Dios Martínez. Seventeen years younger than me. You don't look more than forty, said the inspector. The director laughed: I exercise every day, I don't smoke, I drink very little, I eat right, I used to go running every morning. Not anymore? No, now I've bought myself a treadmill. The two of them laughed. I listen to Bach on my headphones and I almost always run three or four miles a day. Sacrophobia. If I tell my colleagues the Penitent is suffering from sacrophobia, they'll laugh at me. The man with the mongoose face rose from his chair and said something into the accordionist's ear. Then he sat down again and the accordionist's mouth screwed up into a pout. Like a child on the verge of tears. The violinist had her eyes open and she was smiling. The *narco* and the woman with the cat face bent their heads together. The *narco's* nose was big and bony and aristocratic looking. But aristocratic looking how? There was a wild expression on the accordionist's face, except for his lips. Unfamiliar currents surged through the inspector's chest. The world is a strange and fascinating place, he thought.

There are odder things than sacrophobia, said Elvira Campos, especially if you consider that we're in Mexico and religion has always been a problem here. In fact, I'd say all Mexicans are essentially sacrophobes. Or take gephyrophobia, a classic fear. Lots of people suffer from it. What's gephyrophobia? asked Juan de Dios Martínez. The fear of crossing bridges. That's right, I knew someone once, well, it was a boy, really, who was afraid that when he crossed a bridge it would collapse, so he'd run

across it, which was much more dangerous. A classic, said Elvira Campos. Another classic: claustrophobia. Fear of confined spaces. And another: agoraphobia. Fear of open spaces. I've heard of those, said Juan de Dios Martínez. And one more: necrophobia. Fear of the dead, said Juan de Dios Martínez, I've known people like that. It's a handicap for a policeman. Then there's hemophobia, fear of blood. That's right, said Juan de Dios Martínez. And peccatophobia, fear of committing sins. But there are other, rarer, fears. For instance, clinophobia. Do you know what that is? No idea, said Juan de Dios Martínez. Fear of beds. Can anyone really fear beds, or hate them? Actually, yes, there are people who do. But they can deal with the problem by sleeping on the floor and never going into a bedroom. And then there's trichophobia, or fear of hair. That's a little more complicated, isn't it? Yes, very much so. There are cases of trichophobia that end in suicide. And there's verbophobia, fear of words. Which must mean it's best not to speak, said Juan de Dios Martínez. There's more to it than that, because words are everywhere, even in silence, which is never complete silence, is it? And then we have vestiphobia, which is fear of clothes. It sounds strange but it's much more widespread than you'd expect. And this one is relatively common: iatrophobia, or fear of doctors. Or gynophobia, which is fear of women, and naturally afflicts only men. Very widespread in Mexico, although it manifests itself in different ways. Isn't that a slight exaggeration? Not a bit: almost all Mexican men are afraid of women. I don't know what to say to that, said Juan de Dios Martínez. Then there are two fears that are really very romantic: ombrophobia and thalassophobia, or fear of rain and fear of the sea. And two others with a touch of the romantic: anthophobia, or fear of flowers, and dendrophobia, fear of trees. Some Mexican men may be gynophobes, said Juan de Dios Martínez, but not all of them, it can't be that bad. What do you think optophobia is? asked the director. Opto, worse: fear of opening the eyes. In a figurative sense, that's an answer to what you just said about gynophobia. In a literal sense, it leads to violent attacks, loss of consciousness, visual and auditory hallucinations, and generally aggressive behavior. I know, though not personally, of course, of two cases in which the patient went so far as to mutilate himself. He put his eyes out? With his fingers, the nails, said the director. Good God, said Juan de Dios Martínez. Then we have pedophobia, of course, which is fear of children, and ballistophobia, fear of bullets. That's my phobia,

said Juan de Dios Martínez. Yes, I suppose it's only common sense, said the director. And another phobia, this one on the rise: tropophobia, or the fear of making changes or moving. Which can be aggravated if it becomes agyrophobia, fear of streets or crossing the street. Not to forget chromophobia, which is fear of certain colors, or nyctophobia, fear of night, or ergophobia, fear of work. A common complaint is decidophobia, the fear of making decisions. And there's a fear that's just beginning to spread, which is anthophobia, or fear of people. Some Indians suffer from a heightened form of astrophobia, which is fear of meteorological phenomena like thunder and lightning. But the worst phobias, in my opinion, are pantophobia, which is fear of everything, and phobophobia, fear of fear itself. If you had to suffer from one of the two, which would you choose? Phobophobia, said Juan de Dios Martínez. Think carefully, it has its drawbacks, said the director. Between being afraid of everything and being afraid of my own fear, I'd take the latter. Don't forget I'm a policeman and if I was scared of everything I couldn't work. But if you're afraid of your own fears, you're forced to live in constant contemplation of them, and if they materialize, what you have is a system that feeds on itself, a vicious cycle, said the director.

A few days before Sergio González came to Santa Teresa, Juan de Dios Martínez and Elvira Campos went to bed together. This isn't anything serious, the director warned him, I don't want you to get the wrong idea about where things are going. Juan de Dios Martínez promised that she would set the limits and he would simply abide by her decisions. The director found the first sexual encounter satisfactory. The next time they saw each other, fifteen days later, the results were even better. Sometimes he was the one who called, usually in the afternoon, while she was still at work, and they would talk for five minutes, sometimes ten, about the events of the day. It was when she called him that they made plans to see each other, always at Elvira's apartment in a new building in Colonia Michoacán, on a street of upper-middle-class houses where doctors and lawyers, a few dentists, and one or two college professors lived. Their meetings always followed the same pattern. The inspector left his car parked on the street and took the elevator up, checking in the mirror to make sure his appearance was impeccable, at least to the extent possible, considering his limitations, which he would be the first to enumer-

ate, and then he would ring the director's doorbell. She would open the door, they would greet each other with a handshake or without touching, and immediately they would have a drink sitting in the living room, watching the dark move over the mountains to the east through the glass doors that led onto the big terrace where, in addition to a couple of wooden and canvas chairs and a sun umbrella furled for the night, there was only a steel-gray exercise bicycle. Then, with no preliminaries, they would go into the bedroom and make love for three hours. When they were done, the director would put on a black silk bathrobe and go shower. When she came out, Juan de Dios Martínez would already be dressed, sitting in the living room, gazing not at the mountains but at the stars visible from the terrace. The silence was absolute. Sometimes there would be a party going on in the yard of one of the nearby houses and they would watch the lights and the people walking or embracing next to the pool or coming in and out, as if at random, of the tents erected for the occasion or the gazebos of wood and wrought iron. The director wouldn't talk and Juan de Dios Martínez would contain the urge he sometimes felt to rattle off questions or tell her things about his life that he'd never told anyone. Then she would remind him, as if he'd asked her to, that he had to go and the inspector would say you're right or glance pointlessly at his watch and leave at once. Fifteen days later they would see each other again and everything would be just as it had been the time before. Of course, there wasn't always a party at a house nearby and sometimes the director couldn't or didn't want to drink, but the dim light was always the same, the shower was always repeated, the sunsets and the mountains never changed, the stars were the same stars.

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Around this time, Pedro Negrete traveled to Villaviciosa to hire someone trustworthy for his old friend Pedro Rengifo. He saw several young men. He scrutinized them, asked some questions. He asked if they knew how to shoot. He asked if he could rely on them. He asked if they wanted to make money. It had been a while since he'd been back to Villaviciosa and the town looked the same as it had the last time he was there. Low adobe houses with small front yards. Two bars and a grocery store. To the east, the foothills of mountains that seemed to shrink or grow depending on the progression of the sun and shadows. When he'd made his choice, he called Epifanio over and asked privately what he

thought. Which one is it, boss? The youngest one, said Negrete. Epifanio let his gaze drift over the boy and then he glanced at the others and before he went back to the car he said the kid wasn't bad, but you never knew. Then Negrete let a couple of old men from Villaviciosa buy him a drink. One was very thin, dressed in white, and wearing a gold-plated watch. Judging by the wrinkles on his face, he was over seventy. The other man was even older and thinner and wasn't wearing a shirt. He was short and his torso was covered in scars partly hidden by the folds of his skin. They drank pulque and every so often huge glasses of water because the pulque was salty and made them thirsty. They talked about goats lost in the Blue Hills and about holes in the mountains. During a pause, without fanfare, Negrete called the boy over and told him he'd been chosen. Go on, say goodbye to your mother, said the shirtless old man. The boy looked at Negrete and then looked at the floor, as if thinking what to say, but suddenly he changed his mind, said nothing, and went out. When Negrete left the bar, the boy and Epifanio were leaning on the fender of the car, talking.

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The boy sat beside him, in the back. Epifanio was at the wheel. When they had left the dirt streets of Villaviciosa behind and were driving through the desert, the police chief asked what his name was. Olegario Cura Expósito, said the boy. Olegario Cura Expósito, said Negrete, staring up at the stars, strange name. For a while they were silent. Epifanio tried to tune in a Santa Teresa radio station but he couldn't get it and turned off the radio. From his window the police chief glimpsed a flash of lightning many miles away. Just then the car shuddered and Epifanio braked and got out to see what he had hit. The police chief watched him head down the highway and then he saw the beam of Epifanio's flashlight. He rolled down the window and asked what it was. They heard a gunshot. The chief opened the door and got out. He took a few steps to stretch his stiff legs, and Epifanio came ambling back. I killed a wolf, he said. Let's see, said the police chief, and the two of them set out into the darkness again. There were no headlights visible on the highway. The air was dry but sometimes there were gusts of salty wind, as if before it made its way into the desert the air had brushed across a salt marsh. The boy looked at the lighted dashboard of the car and then he covered his face with his hands. A few yards away the police chief ordered Epifanio

to pass him the flashlight and he shone it on the body of the animal lying in the road. It isn't a wolf, said the police chief. Oh, no? Look at its coat, wolves' coats are shinier, sleeker, not to mention they aren't dumb enough to get themselves run over by a car in the middle of a deserted highway. Let's see, let's measure it, you hold the flashlight. Epifanio trained the beam on the animal as the chief laid it straight and eyeballed it. Coyotes, he said, are twenty-eight to thirty-six inches long, counting the head. What would you say this one measures? About thirty-two? asked Epifanio. Correct, said the police chief. And he went on: coyotes weigh between twenty-two and thirty-five pounds. Pass me the flashlight and pick it up, it won't bite you. Epifanio picked up the dead animal, cradling it in his arms. How much would you say it weighs? Somewhere between twenty-six and thirty-three, maybe, said Epifanio. Like a coyote. Because it is a coyote, jackass, said the police chief. They shone the flashlight in its eyes. Maybe it was blind and that's why it didn't see me, said Epifanio. No, it wasn't blind, said the police chief, looking at the coyote's big dead eyes. Then they left the animal by the side of the road and went back to the car. Epifanio tried to get a Santa Teresa station again. All he heard was static and he turned the radio off. He imagined that the coyote he'd hit was a female coyote and it was looking for a safe place to give birth. That's why it didn't see me, he thought, but he wasn't satisfied by the explanation. At El Altillo, when the first lights of Santa Teresa appeared, the police chief broke the silence into which the three of them had fallen. Olegario Cura Expósito, he said. Yes, sir, said the boy. So what do your friends call you? Lalo, said the boy. Lalo? Yes, sir. Did you hear that, Epifanio? I heard, said Epifanio, still thinking about the coyote. Lalo Cura? asked the police chief. Yes, sir, said the boy. You're kidding, right? No sir, that's what my friends call me, said the boy. Did you hear that, Epifanio? asked the police chief. Sure, I heard, said Epifanio. His name is Lalo Cura, said the police chief, and he started to laugh. *La locura*, lunacy, get it? Of course I get it, said Epifanio, and he started to laugh too. Soon the three of them were laughing.

That night the Santa Teresa police chief slept soundly. He dreamed about his twin brother. They were fifteen and they were poor and they had gone out to roam the scrub hills where many years later Colonia Lindavista would rise. They crossed a gully where boys sometimes went

in the rainy season to hunt toads, which were poisonous and had to be killed with stones, although he and his brother were interested in lizards, not toads. At dusk they returned to Santa Teresa, children scattering through the countryside like defeated soldiers. On the edge of the city there was always traffic, trucks going to Hermosillo or heading north or on their way to Nogales. Some were inscribed with odd phrases. One said: *In a hurry? Go right on under me.* Another one said: *Passing on the left? Just pump my horn.* And another one: *Like the ride?* In the dream neither he nor his brother talked, but all of their movements were identical, the same stride, the same pace, the arm swinging. His brother was already quite a bit taller, but they still looked alike. Then they were back on the streets of Santa Teresa and they strolled along the sidewalk and the dream vanished little by little in a comfortable yellow haze.

That night Epifanio dreamed about the female coyote left by the side of the road. In the dream he was sitting a few yards away, on a chunk of basalt, staring alertly into the dark and listening to the whimpering of the coyote, whose insides were torn up. She probably already knows she lost her pup, thought Epifanio, but instead of getting up and putting a bullet in her brain he sat there and did nothing. Then he saw himself driving Pedro Negrete's car along a long track that came to an end on the slopes of a mountain bristling with sharp rocks. There were no passengers in the car. He couldn't tell whether he had stolen the car or the chief had loaned it to him. The track was straight and he could easily get up to ninety miles an hour, although whenever he hit the accelerator he heard a strange noise from under the chassis, like something jumping. Behind him rose a giant plume of dust, like the tail of a hallucinogenic coyote. But the mountains still looked just as far away, so Epifanio braked and got out to inspect the car. At first glance everything looked all right. The suspension, the engine, the battery, the axles. Suddenly, with the car stopped, he heard the knocks again and turned around. He opened the trunk. There was a body inside. Its hands and feet were tied. A black cloth was wrapped around its head. What the fuck is this? shouted Epifanio in the dream. When he had checked that the body was still alive (its chest was rising and falling, though perhaps too violently), he closed the trunk without daring to remove the black cloth and see who it was. He got back in the car, which leaped forward at the first

thrust. On the horizon the mountains seemed to be burning or crumbling, but he kept driving toward them.

That night Lalo Cura slept well. The cot was too soft, but he closed his eyes and started to think about his new job, and soon he was asleep. He'd been to Santa Teresa only once before, with some old women who had come to the market to sell herbs. He could hardly remember the trip now, because he'd been very small. This time he hadn't seen much either. The lights of the highway ramps and then a neighborhood of dark streets and then a neighborhood of big houses behind high walls bristling with glass. And later another road, heading east, and the sounds of the country. He slept in a bungalow next to the gardener's house, on a cot in a corner that no one used. The blanket smelled of rancid sweat. There was no pillow. On the cot there had been a stack of old newspapers and magazines with pictures of naked women, which he put under the bed. At one in the morning the two men who slept on the cots next to his came in. They were both wearing suits and wide ties and fancy cowboy boots. They turned on the light and looked at him. One of them said: he's a little guy. Lalo smelled them without opening his eyes. They smelled of tequila and *chilaquiles* and rice pudding and fear. Then he fell asleep and didn't dream about anything. The next morning the two men were sitting at the table in the kitchen of the gardener's house. They were eating eggs and smoking. He sat down next to them and drank a glass of orange juice and a cup of black coffee. He didn't want anything to eat. Pedro Rengifo's security chief was an Irishman named Pat and he was the one who made the formal introductions. The two men weren't from Santa Teresa or anywhere nearby. The bigger one was from the state of Jalisco. The other was from Ciudad Juárez, in Chihuahua. Lalo met their eyes and thought they didn't seem like gunmen, they seemed like cowards. When he was done with breakfast the security chief took him to the farthest corner of the yard and gave him a Desert Eagle .50 Magnum pistol. He asked Lalo if he knew how to use it. Lalo said he didn't. The chief put a seven-round magazine on the gun and then found some cans in the weeds that he set on the roof of a car up on blocks. For a while the two of them shot. Then the chief explained how to load a gun, how to use the safety, how to carry it. He said his job would be to watch out for Mrs. Rengifo, the boss's wife, and he would

be working with the two men he'd just met. He asked if he knew how much he would be paid. He told him that payday was every fifteen days, that he personally paid everyone, and no one ever had any complaints in that regard. He asked him his name. Lalo Cura, said Lalo. The Irishman didn't laugh or give him a strange look or think it was a joke. He wrote down the name in a little black book that he kept in the back pocket of his jeans, and then their meeting was over. Before he left he told Lalo his name was Pat O'Bannion.

In September another dead woman was found, this time in a car in the Buenavista subdivision, past Colonia Lindavista. It was a lonely place. The only building there was a prefab house used as an office by the salesmen who showed the plots. The rest of the subdivision was bare, with a few sickly trees, their trunks painted white, the last survivors of an old meadow and woods that drew water from an aquifer. Sunday was the day when the most people bustled around the subdivision. Whole families or developers came to see the plots, although without much enthusiasm, because the most promising spaces were already sold, although no one had started to build yet. The rest of the week, visits were by appointment, and by eight there was no one left except the occasional pack of kids or dogs who had come down from Colonia Maytorena and couldn't find their way back up. The discovery was made by one of the salesmen. He got to the subdivision at nine in the morning and parked in his usual spot, next to the prefab house. As he was about to go in he noticed another car parked in a lot that hadn't been sold yet, just behind a rise in the ground, which had hidden it until then. He thought it might be another salesman's car but dismissed the idea as absurd, because who would leave his car so far away when he could park right next to the office? So instead of going inside, he headed toward the strange car. He thought maybe the driver was a drunk who had parked there to sleep, or someone lost, because the exit for the southbound highway wasn't far away. He even thought it might be an overeager buyer. The car, when he came around the rise (excellent plot, with nice views and enough land to build a pool on later), struck him as too old to belong to a buyer. He was leaning again toward the idea that it was a drunk and was tempted to turn back, but then he saw a woman's head resting against one of the rear windows and decided to keep going. The woman was wearing a

white dress and she was barefoot. She was about five foot seven. There were three cheap rings on her left hand, on the index finger, middle finger, and ring finger. On her right hand she was wearing a couple of bracelets and two big rings with fake stones. According to the medical examiner's report, she had been vaginally and anally raped and then strangled. She wasn't carrying any identification. The case was assigned to Inspector Ernesto Ortiz Rebolledo, who first made inquiries among Santa Teresa's high-class hookers to see whether anyone knew the dead woman, and then, when his questioning yielded scant results, among the cheap hookers, but no one from either group had seen her before. Ortiz Rebolledo visited hotels and boardinghouses, checked out some motels on the edge of town, mobilized his informers. His efforts were unsuccessful, and the case was soon closed.

In the same month, two weeks after the discovery of the dead woman in the Buenavista subdivision, another body turned up. The victim was Gabriela Morón, eighteen, shot by her boyfriend, Feliciano José Sandoval, twenty-seven, both of them workers at the maquiladora Nip-Mex. The events, according to the police investigation, revolved around a fight caused by Gabriela Morón's refusal to immigrate to the United States. The suspect, Feliciano José Sandoval, had already made two attempts and had been sent back each time by the American border police, which hadn't diminished his desire to try his luck for a third time. According to some friends, Sandoval had relatives in Chicago. Gabriela Morón, on the other hand, had never crossed the border, and after finding work at Nip-Mex, where she was well liked by her bosses, which meant she had hopes of a quick promotion and a raise, her interest in seeking her fortune across the border dropped to practically zero. For a few days the police looked for Feliciano José Sandoval in Santa Teresa and Lomas de Poniente, the Tamaulipas town he was from, and an arrest order was also issued by the proper American authorities, in case the suspect, his dream come true, had made it to the United States, although oddly enough no *coyote* or *pollero* who might have helped him cross over was questioned. To all intents and purposes, the case was closed.

The next dead woman appeared in October, at the dump in the Arsenio Farrell industrial park. Her name was Marta Navales Gómez. She was twenty years old, five foot seven, and she had long brown hair. She had been missing from home for two days. She was dressed in a bathrobe and stockings that her parents didn't recognize as hers. She had been anally and vaginally raped several times. The cause of death was strangulation. The odd thing about the case was that Marta Navales Gómez worked at Aiwo, a Japanese maquiladora located in the El Progreso industrial park, but her body was found in the Arsenio Farrell industrial park, in the dump, a difficult place to reach unless you were driving a garbage truck. The body was found by some children in the morning, and by noon, when it was taken away, a considerable number of workers had gathered around the ambulance to see whether the victim was a friend, coworker, or acquaintance.

In October, too, the body of another woman was found in the desert, a few yards from the highway between Santa Teresa and Villaviciosa. The body, which was in an advanced state of decomposition, was facedown, and the victim was dressed in a sweatshirt and synthetic-fabric pants, in the pocket of which was found an ID card in the name of Elsa Luz Pintado, an employee at Hipermercado Del Norte. The killer or killers didn't bother to dig a grave. Nor did they bother to venture too far into the desert. They just dragged the body a few yards and left it there. Subsequent questioning at Hipermercado Del Norte yielded the following results: none of the cashiers or saleswomen had gone missing recently; Elsa Luz Pintado had been on the payroll, yes, but it had been a year and a half since she lent her services to that branch or any other branch of the superstore chain that stretched across the north of Sonora; those who had known Elsa Luz Pintado described her as a tall woman, five foot seven and a half, and the body found in the desert probably measured five foot three at most. An unsuccessful attempt was made to discover the whereabouts of Elsa Luz Pintado in Santa Teresa. The officer in charge of the case was Inspector Ángel Fernández. The forensic report failed to establish the cause of death, alluding vaguely to the possibility of strangulation, but it did confirm that the body had been in the desert for at least seven days and no more than one month. Sometime later Inspector Juan de Dios Martínez joined the investigation and is-

sued a request for a search for Elsa Luz Pintado, who had presumably also disappeared. He wanted an official letter to be sent to police stations all over the state, but his request was returned with the recommendation that he focus on the specific case under investigation.

In the middle of November, Andrea Pacheco Martínez, thirteen, was kidnapped on her way out of Vocational School 16. Although the street was far from deserted, there were no witnesses, except for two of Andrea's classmates who saw her head toward a black car, probably a Perogrino or a Spirit, where a person in sunglasses was waiting for her. There may have been other people in the car, but Andrea's classmates didn't get a look at them, partly because the car windows were tinted. That afternoon Andrea didn't come home and her parents filed a police report a few hours later, after they had called some of her friends. The city police and the judicial police took charge of the case. When she was found, two days later, her body showed unmistakable signs of strangulation, with a fracture of the hyoid bone. She had been anally and vaginally raped. There was tumefaction of the wrists, as if they had been bound. Both ankles presented lacerations, by which it was deduced that her feet had also been tied. A Salvadorean immigrant found the body behind the Francisco I School, on Madero, near Colonia Álamos. It was fully dressed, and the clothes, except for the shirt, which was missing several buttons, were intact. The Salvadorean was accused of the homicide and spent two weeks in the cells of Police Precinct #3, at the end of which he was released. When he got out he was a broken man. A little later he crossed the border with a *pollero*. In Arizona he got lost in the desert and after walking for three days, he made it to Patagonia, badly dehydrated, where a rancher beat him up for vomiting on his land. He was picked up by the sheriff and spent a day in jail and then he was sent to a hospital, where the only thing left for him to do was die in peace, which he did.

On December 20, the last violent death of a woman was recorded for the year 1993. The victim was fifty years old and, as if to contradict some voices that were timidly beginning to be raised, she died at home and her body was found at home, not in a vacant lot, or a dump, or the yellow scrub of the desert. Her name was Felicidad Jiménez and

she worked at the Multizone-West maquiladora. The neighbors found her on the bedroom floor, naked from the waist down, with a piece of wood jammed in her vagina. The cause of death was multiple stab wounds, more than sixty as counted by the medical examiner, delivered by her son, Ernesto Luis Castillo Jiménez, with whom she lived. The boy, according to the testimony of some of the neighbors, suffered from attacks of madness, which sometimes, depending on the state of the family finances, were treated with anti-anxiety medication or stronger drugs. The police found him that very night, hours after the macabre deed, wandering the dark streets of Colonia Morelos. In his statement he admitted without any coercion whatsoever that he had killed his mother. He also admitted to being the Penitent, the desecrator of churches. When he was asked what made him jam the piece of wood in his mother's vagina, first he answered that he didn't know, and then, after thinking about it more carefully, that he had done it to teach her. Teach her what? asked the policemen, among whom were Pedro Negrete, Epifanio Galindo, Ángel Fernández, Juan de Dios Martínez, and José Márquez. To take him seriously. Then he lapsed into incoherence and was transferred to the city hospital. Felicidad Jiménez had another son, an older son, who had immigrated to the United States. The police tried to contact him, but no one could provide a reliable address. In the subsequent search of the house they found no letters from this son, or any personal objects left behind after his departure, or anything that testified to his existence. Just two photographs: in one, Felicidad appears with two boys between the ages of ten and thirteen, both of them staring seriously into the camera. In the other picture, dating farther back, Felicidad appears again with two children, one just a few months old, gazing up at her (her killer, years later), and the other, about three, who would immigrate to the United States and never come back to Santa Teresa. When he was released from the psychiatric hospital, Ernesto Luis Castillo Jiménez was taken to the Santa Teresa prison, where he proved to be unusually talkative. He didn't like to be alone and he was always requesting the presence of policemen or reporters. The police tried to pin other unsolved murders on him. The prisoner's willing nature invited it. Juan de Dios Martínez was sure Castillo Jiménez wasn't the Penitent. Probably the only person he had killed was his mother, and he couldn't even be held responsible for that, because it was clear he was mentally unstable. And this was the last death of 1993,



which was the year the killings of women began in the Mexican state of Sonora, under Governor José Andrés Briceño of the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN), and Santa Teresa Mayor José Refugio de las Heras of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), decent and upright men who did the right thing, without fear of reprisals, prepared for any unpleasantness.

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Before the end of the year, however, another lamentable event occurred that had nothing to do with the killings of women, assuming the killings were related to one another, which had yet to be proved. Around this time, Lalo Cura and his two sorry partners worked every day protecting Pedro Rengifo's wife. Lalo had seen Pedro Rengifo only once, from far away. And yet by now he knew several of the bodyguards who worked for him. There were some who seemed interesting. Pat O'Bannion, for example. Or a Yaqui Indian who almost never talked. But all he felt for the two men he worked with was distrust. There was nothing to be learned from them. The tall one from Tijuana liked to talk about California and the women he had met there. He mixed Spanish and English. He told lies, stories appreciated only by his partner, the man from Juárez, who was quieter but struck Lalo as the less trustworthy of the two. One morning, like so many others, Pedro Rengifo's wife took the children to school. They left in two cars, the wife's light green Mercedes, and a brown Jeep Grand Cherokee that stood parked at the corner outside the school all morning with two other bodyguards inside. These two were called the *kids' bodyguards*, in the same way that Lalo and his two partners were called the *wife's bodyguards*, all of them inferior to the three on Pedro Rengifo's team, who were called the *boss's bodyguards* or the *boss's men*, thus indicating a hierarchy not only of pay and duties but also of bravery, daring, and disregard for personal safety. After she dropped the children off at school, Pedro Rengifo's wife went shopping. First she stopped at a boutique and then she went into a drugstore and later she decided to visit a friend on Calle Astrónomos, in Colonia Madero. For almost an hour Lalo Cura and the two bodyguards waited for her, the man from Tijuana in the car and Lalo and the man from Juárez leaning on the fender, in silence. When Pedro Rengifo's wife came out (her friend accompanied her to the door), the man from Tijuana got out of the car and Lalo and the other bodyguard straightened. There were a

few people on the street. Not many, but a few. People walking into town to run some errand or another, people getting ready for the Christmas holidays, people going out to buy tortillas for lunch. The sidewalk was gray but the sun coming through the branches of the trees made it look bluish, like a river. Pedro Rengifo's wife gave her friend a kiss and stepped out onto the sidewalk. The man from Juárez hurried to open the gate for her. On one side of the street, the sidewalk was empty. On the other side, two maids were walking toward them. As Pedro Rengifo's wife came through the gate, she turned and said something to her friend, who was still in the doorway. Then the bodyguard from Tijuana spotted two men walking behind the two maids and he stiffened. Lalo Cura saw his face and he saw the men and he knew instantly that they were gunmen and they were there to kill Pedro Rengifo's wife. The man from Tijuana sidled up to the man from Juárez, who was still holding open the gate, and said something, though it wasn't clear whether it was in words or gestures. Pedro Rengifo's wife smiled. Her friend gave a laugh that Lalo heard like something coming from very far away, from the top of a hill. Then he saw the way the man from Juárez was looking at the man from Tijuana: up and down, like a pig staring into the sun. With his left hand he released the safety of his Desert Eagle and then he heard the clack of heels, Pedro Rengifo's wife heading to the car, and the voices of the two maids, full of question marks, as if instead of chatting they were constantly interrogating each other and lapsing into astonishment, as if not even they could believe what they were saying. Neither of them was over twenty. They were wearing ocher skirts and yellow blouses. The friend, who was waving goodbye from the doorway, was wearing tight pants and a green sweater. Pedro Rengifo's wife was wearing a white suit and her high-heeled shoes were white too. Lalo thought about his boss's wife's outfit just as the other two bodyguards took off down the street. He wanted to shout: don't run, you fucking pussies, but he could only murmur pussies. Pedro Rengifo's wife didn't notice anything. The gunmen shoved the maids aside. One was carrying an Uzi submachine gun. He was thin and his skin was very dark. The other was carrying a pistol and wearing a dark suit and a white shirt, without a tie, and he looked like a professional. Just as the maids were pushed aside to clear the line of fire, Pedro Rengifo's wife felt someone tugging on her suit and pulling her to the ground. As she went down she saw the maids fall in front of her and she thought there had been an earthquake. Out