



# TRANSLATORS' RINCÓN de TRADUCTORES CORNER



“The Case of the Unfaithful Translator”

by José María Merino

*translated by*  
Erin Goodman

RT/TC 005 (2020)  
ISSN: 2694-2801





## Introduction

**“The Case of The Unfaithful Translator”** is a short story by prolific Spanish writer and poet José María Merino, originally in the collection titled *Cuentos del Barrio de Refugio* (Ed. Alfaguara, 1994). Merino is known for his capacity to realistically capture the complex human experience from a personal perspective, while weaving in dreams, fantasy, and the creative experience, such as the idea of entering into fiction itself; this story is a prime example – Merino presents an intriguing insider’s perspective on the day-to-day activities of a translator, in this case one who succumbs to his temptation to manipulate the original text.

Considered one of the most prominent contemporary Spanish writers, Merino is best known for his novels and short stories, though he has also written several books of poetry, literary essays, books for children, and two memoirs. Merino has taught and conducted workshops and seminars in Spain and the United States at numerous institutions, including at Dartmouth College, the Universidad Complutense, Universidad Carlos III, and the Universidad Internacional Menéndez y Pelayo (Santander). He has received many important awards and distinctions including the National Children’s and Young People’s Literature Award (1993) and the National Narrative Literature Award (2013). Merino was elected to the Real Academia Española in 2008.

### About the translator

Erin Goodman holds a Certificate in English-Spanish Translation from the University of Massachusetts-Boston, an Ed.M. from Harvard University and a B.A. from Wellesley College. She translated the memoir *Prisoner of Pinochet: My Year in a Chilean Concentration Camp*, by Sergio Bitar (University of Wisconsin Press, 2017). Her translations of poetry and short stories have been published in *Poetry International Rotterdam* (2015), *spoKe* (2018), the *La Guagua Poetry Anthology* (Loom Press, 2019), and in the Australian literary journal *The Lifted Brow* (2020).

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## THE CASE OF THE UNFAITHFUL TRANSLATOR

*A man was afflicted by a deep melancholy.* That was the direct and most natural translation, and the text went on without presenting a challenge, just like the rest of the pages in that chapter, which was less complicated than the previous ones. But the inertia that had kept him seated at his computer for an hour typing almost without pause was suddenly interrupted by the evocative figure of that melancholy man. Apparently, the original was referring to the madness of a person remorsefully recalling something that happened in their past, and the man was sketched in his imagination with the traces of recognizable signs.

He pushed back his chair, lit a cigarette, and turned his gaze to the street. It was already past ten, but winter had cast an immense dark cloud over the city, giving the morning the appearance of endless twilight.

*Morning, you are the same dirty afternoon as yesterday, but I change your name to obscure this dark stillness from which nothing can save us,* he had written in one of those illuminations that sometimes came to him and that rarely developed into actual poems, but which he held onto with an inevitable sense of ownership. He kept this one in the same little room where he had written it, affixed with a thumbtack to the nearest wall, next to the calendar.

There was a crepuscular air outside, and the gas heater whirled next to the table, struggling against the invading cold that slipped through the cracks of the old house, in a neighborhood that, like all things humble, was built to withstand inclement weather.

His days as a student living in some of the neighborhood boarding houses were long behind him, and his future had turned out to be comprised of similar elements to the ones that had made up his daily reality in those years: cold; dankness; dark stairways that smelled of cooking; apartments that unknown inhabitants had redistributed until they were shrunken into tiny rooms with high ceilings, across from balconies behind which one could imagine a similar reality, also the result of a succession of interminable downsizings of rooms full of dilapidated furniture.



It was the same scene, although now he was the one paying the rent and he didn't live in a guesthouse but rather in what the building administrator—a skinny old man who wore a pinstripe suit and a gray hat, like some underworld character in one of those old detective films—euphemistically called a studio apartment.

He paid the rent just as he paid for everything required to lead that life that, after his youthful dreams, had been the only possible means of ensuring his independence. And in order to pay rent and everything he needed to subsist, he translated books.

Sometimes, contemplating how little he had progressed in life, he thought that perhaps it would have been better to have continued collecting the money that had been sent promptly at the end of each month from his home city, where his father had a small furniture factory that he would have inherited. But that modest rentier's life wouldn't have been possible either, since his detachment from the family business had been supplanted by the doting attention of a brother-in-law who, over time, had taken ownership of everything. And now that his parents were deceased, he had ultimately lost touch with that city of his childhood and youth.

But he wasn't necessarily unhappy to be the one financing his present austere lifestyle, which reminded him so much of his life as a student so long ago. He finished his cigarette and, turning his imagination away from the outline of the melancholy man, he brought his chair closer to the computer once again and continued effortlessly typing up the translation of the rest of the paragraph—*like all melancholy people, his spirit was fixated on a particular idea and for him this idea occasioned a continually renewed sadness*—when the telephone rang.

The answering machine was one of the few luxuries he allowed himself. With the same anxiety that he always felt upon hearing his own voice, he now heard it again: “this is so-and-so's number; if you'd like to leave a message, please do so after the tone.” Amaya's voice followed: “This is Amaya,” and right away he picked up the receiver, connected the call, and began to talk with her. Amaya had some questions about the proofs of a catalog he had translated and, after searching for his copy, he went about clarifying them.

When it seemed that the conversation was over, Amaya gave him some updates from the publishing house and, finally, told him that they had heard that another novel by Kate Courage would soon arrive. “Well, I'm letting you know that another Kate Courage novel is about to arrive,” she had said. “They're sending it to us on a disk because it's going to be published at the



same time in I-don't-know-how-many countries. There seems to be quite a rush, so I'll send it to you as soon as I have it."

"How much of a rush?" he had managed to respond, with an alarm that outwardly conveyed a strictly professional concern, because really he only had one book pending, but she reassured him: "Don't worry, it's not for tomorrow," she said, "first they have to send it to me, and after I send it to you, have a look and we'll talk."

He was more irked than surprised by this news, because he had been expecting it for a long time and the fact that it had finally happened recalled the threatening premonition that those now-distant letters about the Kathleen Crossfield books had already dredged up. The feeling of unease that he'd had under control for so long became dislodged and took its place alongside anxiety, but he made an effort to keep calm and not let himself get carried away with panic.

The image of a disheveled old woman who was shaking out dish towels on one of the balconies in need of a paint job on the dirty façade across the way—an involuntary witness to his perplexity that cold, gray morning—managed to completely upend his desire to continue working and he decided to go out much earlier than he usually did, because although he liked to walk around the neighborhood during that time of day—when it seemed that some of the stillness and oblivion of the previous night lingered in the streets and usually the only people out and about were women and retirees—he normally didn't do so, in order to turn his work into a real job, and so he stayed tethered to his computer as if he depended on an hourly rate and was bound to the schedules of other workers, only granting himself a twenty-minute break around eleven to take a quick walk during which he had a coffee and bought the newspaper, bread, and cigarettes.

On Corredera, next to the church that in past centuries had been a parish first belonging to the Portuguese and then to the Germans, several beggars began to gather in what by noon would become the long line for the charity lunch. Over time he had come to know the neighborhood quite well. The line forming at San Antonio upheld the pious ancestral tradition of Refugio, just like the hookers who, already swarming in the square a little further up, had exercised the oldest profession in the area since the Golden Age itself.

His was a neighborhood of prostitutes and poets. The prostitutes had moved in along with certain festivities in the back patios of the houses along San Bernardo Street, balancing out the



grave severity of their facades. As for the poets, Quevedo had had a house there, and Rubén, Carrere, and Juan Ramón had lived there, and José Hierro was born on one of those streets.

Beyond the prostitutes' block, groups of homeless people were camped out taking advantage of the shelter from the porticos, almost motionless among filthy blankets and large cardboard boxes. Paradoxically, this penury didn't induce sorrow or repugnance in him, but rather a fatalistic tranquility, and he accepted it because it was well matched with the deterioration of the buildings and the lack of street cleaning.

No longer assuming any nobility or pretense, nor a trace of durability, it all manifested in one of the true faces of the world, evolving naturally until becoming the gesture of a skeleton or the grimace of a skull.

Like every day, Nico the beggar approached him on the sidewalk, asking for a cigarette and giving his opinion about the weather. He listened attentively, but said goodbye right away and went around the large central trench where the benches and beds of bare earth were scattered, covered with innumerable dog droppings. Aligned in the center of a bookshop window, he suddenly came upon Kathleen Crossfield's books. He stopped, looked at the covers of all those novels that he had translated and thought that, precisely that morning, the unexpected and compact display of the American's books seemed to hold a mocking message specially addressed to him.

Ever since he had read the first of those novels, when he was commissioned to translate them, he had felt a belligerent antipathy toward the protagonist. As presented by her author, the detective Kate Courage—a nom de guerre that cloaked another, much more distinguished name—was a slender woman just over thirty, with honey-colored hair and huge, bright violet eyes and a beautiful complexion, who, besides being very cultured and speaking several languages (she came from an important Boston family and had been educated in the most distinguished all-female college in the East) was in excellent physical shape and could just as easily practice kempo-karate or aim a gun, win at fencing, ride a horse, navigate and sail a yacht or pilot a plane. On top of it all, she was funny, vivacious, cheerful, and seductive.

Such perfection—the main element of those detective novels full of academic scenes and educated conversations, in which few actual deaths occurred, and all of which were quite orderly—had already overwhelmed him in the first of the books, but it became insufferable when he found out that he would have to translate at least half a dozen more.



He was startled from his immobility by a reflection in the shop window and quickly shifted his position fearing being hit by a vehicle, before discovering that the reflection had been produced by a human figure that had just emerged suddenly from behind the large dumpster on the opposite sidewalk.

It was a fairly young man with light hair, wearing a blue coat. The man's hunched and elusive appearance made him think it was one of those passers-by that were often seen in the area, perhaps a frequenter of the soup kitchen. But this new character's eyes caught his attention—they were fixed on him with a clearly menacing expression. He assumed then that it was some drug addict in the difficult throes of sensing his pleasant inner warmth dissipate, and he turned away from the window, hurrying on toward Gran Vía.

He mostly made his living by translating books, and he couldn't choose them according to which ones he deemed of potential literary or cultural interest. His lack of discernment when accepting originals, along with his quickly-executed, precise, and correct translations, were what made him sought-after by publishing houses, and he never wanted for work. But the translation of the first three novels featuring Kate Courage—*Tussle at the Symposium*, *Never on Sabbatical*, and *Too Many Blackbirds on Campus*—had been very unpleasant, made almost insufferable by how pretentious he found the main character, surely a reflection of the author's personality. The prospect of being forced to translate another of her adventures made him intuit the fastidious tedium he'd surely endure.

At first he had confessed his opinion to the person who was his professional interlocutor at the publishing house before Amaya started working there. However, his objections were met with a firm and almost distrustful disapproval. How was it possible that he wasn't interested in the Crossfield books? This author was a marvel of finesse, a font of lively and thrilling culture. Before dedicating herself exclusively to writing, she had worked as a professor at a famous university, was highly regarded in cultural circles, and was an essential figure in criminal narratives written by women. His interlocutor then concluded his defense with a look that was more condescending than understanding. He said at last that he supposed it must be quite difficult to enjoy a book when one was bound to the obligation of translating it within a short time frame, but those books are quality, true quality, and he had left with a sense of ridicule and even feeling a bit guilty, because perhaps he was really just envious of the confidence the author conveyed through her protagonist, apparently convinced of her writing and actions, whilst in his own poetic





illuminations—which he had never shown to anyone, not even Marta—the only thing he managed to reflect, as his strongest personality trait, was a disturbing and increasingly genuine bafflement at the world.

But after leafing through those novels that the editor so defended, he set aside his reservations and regrets: surely, this was one of those authors who had the audacity to claim to understand the ultimate meaning of things, and Kate Courage was just one key among many others that to him only indicated blind and self-satisfied petulance.

On the Gran Vía, the sleaze of the neighborhood was eclipsed, although misery's aftermath persisted in the form of a beggar squatting behind his succinct proclamation. He walked for almost two hours through the neighborhoods on the other side and discovered that increasing numbers of citizens seemed delirious: people talking to themselves or guys asking for alms, offering bewildering pretexts. A woman with a summoning look blocked his way to show him a blurry photograph. When he managed to dodge her, he saw that just a few paces behind him, the man with the threatening eyes who had emerged from behind the dumpster seemed to be following his same route. He decided it was time to go home and he returned quickly, giving up the idea of going to the market at the Plaza de los Mostenses to do some shopping.

It was while he was translating the fourth of the Kate Courage novels—*The Case of the Distracted Dean*—that he had managed to find a way to turn that boring, cloying work into a fun and stimulating activity. Filled with compassion for the shy and kind Harvey, an ugly literature professor, the sweet Kate gives herself over to him one night, after a long and fruitless search for the microfilm of a manuscript (it was one of the clues to locate the kidnapper-turned-murderer of a newly hired female professor—a doctoral student who had killed her out of sheer envy while he was in the midst of completing his thesis). In the original, the scene was constructed to evoke a mixture of humor and tenderness, with some poetic evocations, like the reference to the sweet consummation of the loving encounter between Beauty and the Beast.

Conjuring up synonyms to describe the rotundness of Harvey, whose gratitude toward Kate's generosity in the original had made him babble lots of *Oh my God* and *Good Heavens*, he had the idea of nuancing the scene in a grotesque manner and discovered by chance that if he used certain synonyms, the phrasing of the dialogue could, to the reader's imagination, seem more lewd than tender. With joy and pure playfulness, he continued to perfect the translation of the scene



from that perspective, until he attained what he thought was an acceptable result, whose ambiguity led to obscene reverberations, a very funny passage that only appeared to respect the author's desire for balance in delicately framing the copulation scene.

The adaptation required effort, but he was so satisfied with his achievement that he didn't resist the temptation to use it as if it were the literal translation of that fragment of the novel. And from then on he continued to treat Kate Courage in a similar way, until her brilliance hinted at arrogance, her boldness became recklessness and her worldliness, pedantry. He also found a way for her use of sex as a sincere form of human communication to instead come across as vulgar promiscuity.

It wasn't easy work and it forced him to devote more hours than he usually did to this literary genre, but he did it with pleasure, almost with passion, because the difficulty lay mainly in attaining a prudent and measured novel in which, despite the nuances of his translation, Kate Courage would continue to be a cultured, intelligent, elegant, and courageous protagonist, who at the end of each plot brilliantly elucidates mysteries and solves problems. The challenge was directed to his own imagination and creativity and consisted of subtly transforming the Kate Courage the author had intended into a less idealized character, even seeking to highlight with irony those traits that got on his nerves: the distinction that the fictional detective owed to her high-brow family origin and her apparently encyclopedic knowledge.

And it turned out that, after having translated two new Kate Courage novels along those lines, no one, neither the editor nor any potential readers, made accusations of having noticed differences between the translation and the original. Thus his initial abhorrence of the American's books turned into interest and he looked forward to the new installments in the series, knowing that his translations would provide him with many delightful moments of authentic literary creation, like when he was tasked with translating a truly quality text.

When he arrived at home and went to pick up the mail, he looked for Toribio in the shadows of the foyer, climbed the creaking stairs, entered his small flat, and tried to work for a while before lunch. But although the passage he was working on wasn't complicated, he found that he couldn't concentrate. The news about the arrival of Crossfield's new book had deeply displeased him and the memory of what had happened continued to cause him discomfort and angst, to the point that he had not been able to discard the correspondence he kept about the matter, because those letters



held that mysterious element of truth, which cannot be destroyed without causing permanent damage in its estimation.

When seven Kate Courage books were already on the market and he celebrated by secretly rejoicing in his impunity and the mastery of the metamorphosis he had achieved, a letter sent by a certain Professor Valdez had arrived via the publishing house:

*I have personally met Kathleen Crossfield, for whom I feel admiration and deep affection, and she has shown me the translations that you have done of her detective series featuring Kate Courage. I believe that my experience as a professor in the Spanish Department of this University gives me some authority in the field, but the reason for my letter is not to judge the formal aspects of your translation—which is too often weighed down by the inertia of the original construction—but to refer to other more subtle ones, where it's not so much skill and knowledge of the respective languages that are at play; any professional who undertakes the translation of a literary work must have unwavering respect for the author's express will to determine the nature and character of their protagonists. Mr. Lugán, I am unfamiliar with your conduct in the translation of other books, but with Kathleen Crossfield's you have acted as an unfair and perverse translator. You have turned the intelligent, brave, and liberal Kate Courage, an unforgettable character in her genre, into a rather stupid, crazed, and dogmatic being. I have carefully analyzed the books and I have understood that the manipulation has been primarily in the choice of adjectives used to portray her or to describe her attitudes, or in the notions that you have put in her mouth throughout the abundant dialogues in the novels. You have created a distance between the narrator and the detective that is not in the original, certainly with the objective of ridiculing her, and which has no doubt managed to undermine and malign her. I insist that all of this is subtle and it would be difficult to prove in court, because, in short, translation is not a science, nor a technique that relies on safe and immutable methods, but to me it is clear that you have searched for synonyms, phrases, and expressive approaches that lent themselves to distorting the image of Kate Courage that appears in the original texts. Your conduct is reprehensible. As I am aware of Dr. Crossfield's sensitivity, I am sure that the knowledge of your betrayal will be very painful for her, but I cannot leave her in the dark about an issue that so directly affects one of the inalienable moral rights that she possesses. I know that she will be outraged and I hope that she will immediately communicate her outrage to her Spanish editors and that you will get what you deserve, which, in my opinion, should consist, above all, in your immediate distancing from a profession that cannot be based in actions such as the one you have perpetrated, but in the utmost respect for the original text and absolute fidelity to the author's designs.*



Reading the letter brought him back to a reality that he had forgotten, enraptured in his secret game, and he clearly saw the seriousness of the matter and the unpleasant consequences it could have for him, in the event that Crossfield filed a complaint. Throughout that whole day he was thinking of possible solutions, and finally he decided to tell Marta. He called her to set a date and she invited him to dinner the following Friday.

“But you have to take me to the movies,” she said, reaffirming the habitual reciprocity that was one of the conditions of their arrangement.

The relationship between him and Marta retained a kind of camaraderie between classmates, and although they slept together once in a while, it couldn’t be said that their bond had the characteristics of a courtship, but rather of an affectionate and sporadic partnership between loners. Among the confidences they shared about their respective jobs, he had told her how irritating he found the Crossfield books—which she didn’t think were so terrible—and then about the manipulation with which he had transformed his initial annoyance into a creative game. To Marta the forgery had seemed worthy of reproach, and although she didn’t usually opine on his affairs unless he asked her directly, on that occasion she told him that he shouldn’t continue with those inaccurate translations.

“It’s unprofessional, to say the least.”

“Nonsense!” he had said. “It’s a sort of experimental translation. Why shouldn’t we translators experiment, like authors do?”

“You’re supposed to guarantee fidelity to the text, so you convey the author’s intentions as faithfully as possible,” she countered.

“The author’s intentions?” he had exclaimed. “And why should it be assumed that we can clearly deduce the author’s intentions? The meaning of words is often equivocal and almost always loaded with ambiguity.”

“Look,” Marta replied, “I think that in these novels what the author wants is clear, just like the way that she has profiled her character.”

“That’s what you think,” he argued, “but perhaps deep down, Crossfield’s will is actually to describe Kate Courage with the nuances that I’ve come up with. At the end of the day, the results of the character’s actions don’t change, and her successes don’t become failures. Perhaps a professor as distinguished as she, with such refined acquaintances, doesn’t dare to make explicit all the turbid (or simply vulgar) details that one could imagine about the character.”



“I don’t like this at all,” Marta had stated sharply, ending the conversation. “So if you’re not going to stop doing it, don’t tell me about it.”

The Friday after Professor Valdez’s letter arrived, Marta had the delicacy of not reminding him of her old objections. They had watched a fairly boring movie and then they’d gone to her house for dinner. Over dinner, he read her the professor’s letter, but Marta said nothing. They did the dishes and poured some whiskey, but Marta still didn’t offer her opinion.

“So, what do you think?” he finally asked her, because Marta’s silence was making his premonitions about the potential problems he could face even more ominous.

“Well,” said Marta, “let’s go to bed for a bit and then we’ll talk. I think you’ve gotten yourself into a big mess.”

Marta’s advice had consisted of what he, in spite of his disgust, thought he ought to do to avoid jeopardizing his professional career if the grievance were to come to light, and he decided to write immediately to the professor and to the author herself, claiming innocence.

Respectfully, with a humility that seemed to him quite disgusting, he answered the professor, imploring her not to interpret his translations so unfavorably, for at no point had there been any intention on his part to modify the original and much less to falsify it, adding any supplementary irony that he, perhaps mistakenly, seemed to find in the works by the great writer Kathleen Crossfield. That he had been doing his job as a translator for more than twenty years, translating many books of poetry, fiction, and essays from English and French into Spanish, for the best publishers, without ever having received any kind of complaint. That he was, however, willing to give all kinds of explanations and technical justifications to Ms. Crossfield, or to whomever it might be necessary. And, as a show of good will, and of his regret for any undesirable modifications slipped into the translation unconsciously and against his will, he would even personally finance, out of his own pocket, any rectifications deemed necessary in possible future editions, despite the fact that an exact correspondence between languages was practically impossible, as no doubt the professor knew much better than he did, especially if they belong to different linguistic subgroups, as was the case, et cetera, et cetera.

In the letter to Kathleen Crossfield he was even more careful and his humility bordered on abjection, because after repeating the same arguments, excuses, and promises as in the letter to Professor Valdez, he declared himself an enthusiastic admirer of Kate Courage—a fascinating



literary character full of vigor and overwhelming likeability, who deserves to be in the gallery of immortals, et cetera, et cetera.

He sent both letters via an expensive and expeditious service and, shamefully aware that he had reacted like a poor devil, for a few days he anxiously waited to be summoned by the publisher to justify his conduct, anticipating a complaint. He carefully reviewed all the books, trying to defend as solidly as possible those linguistic alternatives that he had chosen when he characterized the protagonist Kate Courage and give life to her adventures in the Spanish language, but he received no news, and although he spoke a couple of times with the person who, before Amaya arrived, had handled translations at the publishing house, there was no hint that the anticipated charge had been made.

Finally, one day he received a letter from the United States, apparently sent by Crossfield herself, and ill at ease, he prepared to read it. With concise displeasure, the author acknowledged receipt of his justifications and added that she was trying not to worry too much about his betrayal—about which she had already heard in detail from her friend Professor Valdez—considering the limited diffusion that the Spanish market implied for her books, within the vast world in which her work was known and appreciated. That's why she hadn't worried about the gender of the translator, which in the case of important countries, such as Germany or France, was contractually required to be a woman.

*For now, I don't even consider it essential to file a complaint against you. Furthermore, your pathetic actions as a resentful man and a true traduttore traditore have given me an idea for a new book, in which there appears a character like you, an unfaithful translator whose death—because the role corresponding to such a character in my novel's plot will be that of the victim—will be meticulously and effectively investigated by Kate. Not only will I not ban you, but I may even consider the possibility that you translate the book, and I will do so if I am able to clear up my serious doubts about your true and correct understanding of my language, and if you are still alive at that point.*

The shame and discomfort of that episode remained fully present for him, and his concerns had been revived with the same intensity as before. Unable to placate his restlessness enough to continue working anymore before lunch, he abandoned his efforts and, after leafing through the newspaper in just as distracted and nervous a manner, he ate mechanically and was



quiet for a while sitting in front of the leftovers of his little meal, until he had finished the bottle of wine.

That same afternoon he called Amaya to find out whether the disk had arrived, but she had no doubt forgotten their conversation that morning.

“What disk?”

When he told her he meant the new Crossfield novel, Amaya laughed.

“Sorry, you misunderstood me,” she clarified, “we received a fax telling us that they’re going to send it to us, but they haven’t done so yet. I’ll send it to you with a courier as soon as I have it, don’t worry.”

The next day, when he went out on his morning routine to get bread and cigarettes, after a few hours spent barely managing to improve his poor efforts from the previous evening, Toribio leaned out the window to ask if his visitor had already left.

“What visitor?” he asked.

Toribio, taking his habitual dimwitted air of distrust to an extreme, explained that a young man, possibly a foreigner, had arrived about an hour earlier and had asked about him, where he lived, and if he would be home at that time.

“I answered him, he went up, and I haven’t seen him come back down.”

He shrugged with indifference, so as to not reveal a baseless fear, but he understood that the human shape that he thought he had glimpsed on the landing of the floor above his must belong to the man Toribio was talking about.

“I thought I saw someone on the stairway above me, but I haven’t had any visitors,” he answered as he went out.

As always, Nico was in the square next to the kiosk, and came trotting up to him.

“Here, give me a cig, and let me ask you something. Do you know a blonde guy with crazy eyes, who must be a foreigner?”

“I haven’t a clue,” he said, trying to show good humor. “I know quite a few people with crazy eyes—foreigners, Spaniards, and independence-seekers alike.”

“When you came by the square yesterday, after we talked, a guy who is definitely not from here approached me to ask, in very poor Spanish, if I knew you and if you were a book transferor, that’s exactly what he said,” explained the beggar.





“And what did you tell him?” he asked.

“What did you want me to say? I said no, of course, that I didn’t know you or anything about you.”

“Very good, Nico, you’ve earned another cigarette!” he exclaimed with poise.

“Looks like it still won’t rain,” Nico informed him. “The taverns are screwed, but it’s fine for those of us who make our living this way.”

The news that a strange man was asking about him gave more consistency to his unease, which aligned with his intuitions. Through the mechanism that determined the logic of his fear, he attributed the unknown interrogator to the appearance of that individual he had discovered watching him the previous day next to the dumpster on Silva Street in front of the bookstore, and who he had sensed again following him along his walk. His fearful suspicions became more intense when, upon returning home, Toribio called out to him and then left his nook to speak with him, his slow and tense gestures giving away the gravity of the situation.

“The guy was there!” he exclaimed. “I went up to take a look and he was still there, I would say crouched, as if waiting for something. I called out to him and he took off like a greyhound, the bastard almost knocked me down the stairs.”

In the afternoon he worked on translating the French essay with unusual dedication, more to take his mind off the forthcoming Crossfield novel and the presence of the mysterious visitor than to make progress on the metaphor of the melancholy man, but his concern made it very difficult to work, and he often lifted his gaze away from the book and screen to let it land on the balconies across the way, where the objects left there—potted plants or junk—signaled the disposition of their tenants.

An unexpected greenish flutter caught his attention and he spotted the small shape of two parakeets perched on one of the balconies. After a while he watched them fly away with a clumsy quivering of the wings and they disappeared from his sight. They had certainly escaped some captivity that had nonetheless been their only means for survival, and when he considered that freedom that would inevitably lead to starvation and cold, he once again surrendered fervently to his work.

That night he didn’t go out for dinner, nor did he leave the apartment during the following two days except to go down to the entranceway to get the mail and ask Toribio to buy bread and





cigarettes, pretending that he had come down with a cold. He tried to justify himself with the good results of his translation work, which that isolation had favored, but he was so ashamed of his fear that he didn't say anything to Marta when she called to propose a date the following weekend. Finally, after those two days, he decided to venture outside to overcome his caution that had all the signs of irrational cowardice.

He went out to buy groceries for the week and, although he stayed alert to avoid any surprises, nothing abnormal happened, nor did he come across that individual who was apparently so interested in him. That evening he confirmed that the previous days' feverish work had drastically advanced the translation, and he set out to dinner at one of the inexpensive restaurants in the area. He ate well and then walked toward the Gran Vía to get a drink, more as an impulse of exorcism rather than celebration.

When he was returning home, someone blocked his path, next to some smelly garbage cans. He understood right away that it was the same figure with those disturbing wandering eyes that he had seen watching him the morning that he had discovered the frieze of Kathleen Crossfield's novels in the bookstore window. The individual was wielding a large knife, like a machete.

"Stay calm," he said. "I'll give you everything I have on me, even my jacket, if you want it."

The other man didn't seem to hear him, and the way he held his torso and bent his arm with the knife clearly indicated that he was going to attack no matter what. He broke free, managing to dodge the knife and, pushing the aggressor, he forced him to follow through with his arm-swing, lose his balance and fall. Then he pushed over the garbage cans and ran with all his might, searching his pockets for his house keys. He felt so pumped up that as he ran he seemed to fly over the damp ground, tearing through the dizzying winter fog.

The flat was very cold and he put several blankets on the bed, but he couldn't warm up. That night he hardly slept, unable to stop thinking about the aggression he had suffered. In all the years he had lived in the neighborhood, he had been confronted with threats a couple of times, by young drug addicts looking for money, but never with the deadly aggression this individual had shown. After living for so long in the neighborhood, people knew him well enough that he could walk around the old streets without having to take too many precautions.



In his concern, he associated the attack with the news that the latest Kathleen Crossfield novel was about to arrive, in which the victim was apparently a translator, and he tried to figure out how the foreigner who had been asking about him and his violent aggressor fit into the equation, but at the same time he understood that it was absurd to establish a link between the American author and that shifty-eyed knife-wielder. No doubt a dangerous madman had ended up in the neighborhood, and he should notify the police in order to prevent repeated aggressions or some barbarous crime that the guy could commit. But when he finally fell asleep in the wee hours of the morning, he dreamt of his assailant's ferocious eyes and he thought that, to describe their gleam and his attitude, he could use those very adept simple and direct adjectives that Kate Courage's creator was so fond of.

The manuscript finally arrived on Wednesday morning and it seemed to him very short, compared to the other novels in the series, but he began to read it with the avidity of someone who intuits that the message he just received contains something of mortal importance.

The literal translation of the title could be *The Case of the Unfaithful Translator*, and from the first pages, this time Kate Courage appears in places that are a far cry from her usual haunts—some orderly New England campus among forest-covered hills, small inns and old mansions. This time she was in the capital of a southern European country, with dirty, noisy streets that smelled of frying oil.

Kate was passing through that city on her way to an important conference on Egyptology—she was a huge fan of the subject and had inherited from a great-aunt a rich collection of objects from Tell-el-Amarna—and during a brief stroll through the center she had found, displayed in the shop window of a bookstore, the translations into that country's language of books written by a professor that was a good friend of hers, whose protagonist was also an attractive and intelligent woman, and an amateur detective.

Precisely this language figured among the languages Kate had mastered. She bought several of the novels, because although she had read them in their original versions, she was eager to reread them in that country's language. She began reading that very night at bedtime, quickly becoming irritated because the translator was apparently a man, and had allowed himself to manipulate the English text in such a way that, although all the twists and turns of the plot were respected, the lovely detective had become some sort of ridiculous hoyden.



Very upset, early the next day Kate Courage decided to take advantage of a free morning before her flight out to try to meet that translator and, representing her friend, express her dejection. With her characteristic dynamism, it only took Kate just over an hour to find the translator: after several calls to the publishing house, she demanded that they provide his address. With the same resoluteness, after failing to contact him by telephone, she went to his home.

When Kate arrived at the building—the man lived on the second floor of a dilapidated house—a police patrol car was parked in front, and two paramedics were loading a stretcher with a body on it into an ambulance. Interested in what might have happened, Kate pestered the police until she learned that the man they were putting in the ambulance was precisely the translator she had come to see.

There the manuscript ended, and an unfinished sentence made it clear that the book was incomplete. He called Amaya to ask her to send the rest of the original to him, but she was quite surprised at his request—she was sure that the text printed on those pages was the only document on the disk that had arrived from the United States.

“I also thought it was very short, but honestly I didn’t even look at it, because I knew you were going to read it...” she said.

She promised him she would look into it immediately, and a while later it was she who phoned him, to confirm that at the publishers they hadn’t misplaced any portion of the manuscript and that they had sent a fax to request the part that was surely missing.

After the abrupt interruption in his reading he tried to forget the manuscript and continue working on a pending translation, but he continued to feel very cold and he was perplexed. Given what he had read, that novel was quite strange. On the one hand, this Kate Courage character had behaved more like the one he had recreated in his translations than the Kate originally imagined by Kathleen Crossfield, because Kate had expressed, in his opinion, sincere and utter contempt toward the country in which she found herself and toward its people, which was inappropriate for a character that had been created based on pretenses of intelligent tolerance. And she was impertinent and arrogant in the dialogues when she spoke, both in her comminatory search for the unfaithful translator and in her interactions with the police officers who responded to her interpellations with stunned docility. On the other hand, the description of the downtown neighborhoods and their toponymy were extraordinarily similar to that same city he lived in, as if Crossfield knew those places perfectly well.



Such speculations would eventually absorb him, and he was unable to devote his attention to anything else. But although he had turned on all the heaters in the apartment, the cold was already unbearable and little by little he understood that, just as the much-anticipated Kate Courage novel seemed like something he had dreamt up, the cold that was gripping him had nothing to do with the temperature of his flat.

He finally opened his eyes: he was lying on the ground on the street, among the scattered garbage bags, and he felt a very intense pain in his gut. Then he recalled the whole sequence of the attack: the appearance of the man with the mad look, the shininess of the blade in his hand, the threatening arc of his body. He hadn't managed to dodge the stabbing and when he fell to the ground the pain continued, like a deep, piercing burning. His assailant had fled on foot after pushing the trash cans on top of him. While he lost consciousness, he had imagined that, like in the story by Bierce, he had quickly returned home. He tried to move but he couldn't, and he had no voice. I'm going to die, he thought, and all the food in the fridge will spoil and I'll never find out how the latest novel by Kate Courage really ended.

But he didn't die. The garbage men, who came round in the early hours of the morning, found his body and called the police. The doctor at a nearby clinic performed first aid and then an ambulance transported him to the hospital, where they operated right away. He was in critical condition, but soon he began to recover.

When he was able to receive visitors, Marta brought him an envelope that she had picked up from Toribio, sent from the United States. It was one of those priority envelopes imprinted with the huge head of a multicolored eagle and he opened it with clumsy eagerness.

Inside there was a brief and urgent letter from Kathleen Crossfield, warning him to guard against a possible attack. An unstable student of Professor Valdez, fanatic and violent, who for a long time had concealed the true nature of his character and impulses, had heard through certain confidences of the aforementioned professor, of the transformations to which the protagonist Kate Courage, of whom he was a fervent admirer, had been subjected by the Spanish translator. Professor Valdez had confided on the subject of the latest Crossfield novel, which would be published simultaneously in the United States and Europe, apparently triggering a certain madness in this student. And, as she had just learned from an impassioned note that the student had left under Professor Valdez's pillow, he was planning to travel to Europe to carry out, with his own



hands, what he considered a fair and even poetic restorative justice.

*The student has disappeared and we fear that he may have gone abroad, searching for you with aggressive intentions. Obviously I have informed the police, and I am informing you, so that you are forewarned if the vindictive dementia of this young man comes to pass.*

That same afternoon Amaya came to visit him. As a gift she brought him a book about ships and navigation that they had just published and she updated him on the past few days, including that the new Kathleen Crossfield novel had arrived.

“I’m reading it and it’s quite entertaining. It’s about a slightly eccentric translator who gets away scot-free with twisting the sense of the original texts in order to ridicule the characters that he doesn’t like.”

“How is that possible?” he asked, throwing Marta a sly look.

Amaya shrugged.

“Hey, it’s a novel. Anything’s possible in fiction, and this one is very well done. The translations scrupulously respect the originals in the plot development, but they distort the traits of some of the characters. The translations keep coming out and nobody realizes it, until the translator stumbles upon the novels of a vindictive author, who ends up finding out what he’s done and decides to off him.”

“She kills him?” he asked, feeling very weak.

“Not directly,” Amaya said. “She manages to recruit a young psychopath who’s an aspiring writer, to whom she feeds the idea as if it were the subject for a novel that she proposes that he write, assuring him that she’ll help him get it published. Kate Courage discovers the motives for the crime thanks to her language proficiency and linguistic erudition. There are some pretty funny passages about ambiguity in communication across different languages. And in this book, Kate Courage is more unbridled than in the others. I’m already halfway through.”

For a few moments he was too stunned to react and then he asked, out of pure habit, how much time there was to complete the translation.

“I already told you it’s a rush job,” Amaya said, getting up to leave, “but don’t worry, this one isn’t for you. Crossfield has sent a note requesting that this book be translated by a woman, what do you make of that?”



“That’s the best possible ending,” he managed to say, while Amaya looked at him with surprise before leaving.

Marta and Amaya’s visits weren’t the only ones of the afternoon. After his IV was replaced, two police officers appeared. One of them showed him the photo of a shady individual, a headshot and a profile, and asked him if he recognized the man.

“That’s him,” he said without hesitation. “He was following me in the neighborhood and that night he attacked me.”

“We’ve got him already,” said one of the officers. “He’s a very dangerous criminal who was on the run. He must have really gone crazy, because that same night he also stabbed a waiter at Fuyuma and a cashier at the Santo Domingo metro station, without stealing anything from either of the victims.”

“He isn’t American?” he asked, and the police officers gave him a strange look.

“Why would he be American?”

He felt scared again and was very tired, but he gave them the letter from Crossfield and translated what was, for him, the most important part—the warning that an American psychopath could be looking for him to kill him. And it was disturbing, he insisted, making an effort to fight through the weariness that was pushing him toward sleep, because a foreign guy had been asking for him in the neighborhood.

“I suppose we can take the letter,” said one of the officers, and when he nodded they said goodbye quickly.

Marta also prepared to leave, but after kissing his cheeks she stared at him inquisitively.

“Are you worried?”

He was confused, but he shook his head.

“Here you’re very safe,” Marta said. “And in the meantime they’ll find that American, if it’s true that he’s come and it’s not some macabre joke by Crossfield. Anyway, if he had come and wanted to harm you, he would already have done so, since he had been lurking around for so many days and he already knew who you were. Don’t worry, Antonio, the thing with the guy who assaulted you is just a case of bad luck.”



He had a bit of a fever and, given the restlessness caused by his bad dreams, he woke up two or three times in the night, alarmed. Like trying to keep his balance while the floor shifted beneath him, each time he had to recover the order of his thoughts, scattered among the memories of the real events and the hallucinations of delirium, where some of the scenes from those novels he'd translated as if he were the character's author also began to resemble reality.

In the early hours of the next morning, after the doctor's visit, one of the nurses came over to him.

"Are you awake?" she asked unnecessarily, because it was obvious that he was. "You have a visitor. She has a special pass."

Before he could turn around, the woman entered his field of vision. She was very beautiful, with honey-colored hair. When she was next to the bed he could smell her exquisite perfume and saw that her eyes were an unusual violet color. The woman spoke in a low voice, in good Spanish.

"First of all, let me explain who I am," the woman said, and he understood that he already knew, accepting that his confusion was beginning to be the only possible reality.