ONE

AFTER THE FUNERAL, Dr. Joel Filártiga came home to a dead telephone. All night Joel had tried getting through to me, dialing my number in California and hearing a ring—and then the operator would break in, announce that all international lines were busy, and disconnect the call.

Now there could be no doubt. The dictator's secret police had isolated him, cutting him off from reaching help abroad.

Filártiga looked around the living room at his family. Beyond exhaustion from their vigil, his wife and three daughters stared helplessly back at him. For the first time since the murder, Joel felt raw fear.

That afternoon, Dr. Filártiga had a long talk with a friend at the Embassy of Peru. The next day, the diplomatic mail pouch carried his letter out of Paraguay.

Asunción—March 31, 1976

Dear friend Richard,

They have struck me a devastating blow. The lords of darkness and death have robbed me of my son Joel. They brutally tortured him and then they killed him. Today I buried him.

I am strong, but I would ask that some friend from the university, or from the "Paraguay Project," come here to be with me during this painful trance, yet another trial for this battered body that has never been able to inure itself to more and more pain.

I do not know why they killed him. But I am sure your help, and that of the other people there, will help me unravel this wrenching tragedy.

We have given a martyr to the cause of man's freedom against the shadowy and sinister forces of death.

I wait for you.

Letters no longer arrive. I do not know why, and I wait for them so.

Joel, senior
3-31-76

I wait for you. SOS
I will send photographs.

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Asunción, Marzo 31, 1976

Querido amigo Richard,

Me han dado un golpe artero. Los dueños de la muerte y de la noche me han robado a mi hijo Joel. Lo martirizaron brutalmente y lo mataron. Hoy lo enterré.

Tengo fortaleza pero pediría la presencia de algún amigo de la universidad, o del "Paraguay Project", para que me acompañe en este doloroso trance, una prueba más para este curtido cuerpo nunca acostumbrado a más y más dolores.

Yo no entiendo por qué fue, pero vuestra ayuda y la de las gentes de allí, me ayudarán a desmadejar esta desgarrante tragedia.

Dimos un mártir a favor de la libertad del hombre contra las fuerzas obscuras y cibernéticas de la muerte.

Os espero.

No me llegan más cartas. No se por qué y tanto las espero.

Joel el grande

31 - III - 76

Os espero. S.O.S.

Mandaré fotografías.

1

It took nearly two weeks for Dr. Filártiga's letter to reach me in Los Angeles.

Those first few months of 1976 had been an exceptionally fulfilling time for me. With all but a few remaining formalities to complete my Ph.D. in Latin American history at UCLA, I had received a postdoctoral fellowship to return to South America. And on top of everything else, the Filártiga family had invited me to stay with them at their home in Asunción, the capital of Paraguay.

On April 13, it all blew apart. Again and again, I called the Filártigas' number in Asunción, only to get busy signals. Finally, asking the local operator to try, I was told that the telephone was "out of order."

I tried getting through to Dr. Filártiga's rural clinic, but the operator at the telephone kiosk there said the family had left the village. Nobody knew when, or even if, they would be back.

At last, I called a mutual friend of ours, Roberto Thompson. In the four years since meeting Roberto, we had come to know each other well. Still, because the Paraguayan secret police routinely monitored international calls, especially those of former political prisoners like Roberto, our conversation would have to be guarded.

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"Hola Roberto. Como has estado? Habla—"

Recognizing my voice, he broke in before I could identify myself. "Fine, just fine. And yourself?" he said casually in English.

Taking his cue, I switched to English as well. "Actually, I'm a little confused. Yesterday I received a letter from a friend, and I can't seem to get through to him by phone. Do you know what I'm talking about? I mean—"

"Yes, of course," he interrupted again, in the same nonchalant voice.

"So tell me," I asked, "is there any possibility of an accident of some kind?"

Roberto answered in precisely chosen words: "No. There's no question of that. Something very bad happened. It definitely wasn't an accident."

"Ah well, my information is several weeks old. I was just wondering how things are now?"

A brief pause. "Better. At first it was very difficult. But people are feeling stronger now."

It was my turn to hesitate. "Listen, Roberto," I said carefully, "if it isn't inconvenient, could you do me a favor and let him know that everyone up here has been informed of what happened. And if he still feels it's necessary, I could come right away. But there are some important things that should be taken care of first. So he must call, or send a telegram or something, to let me know."

"Yes. I see," Roberto replied, now clearly uneasy.

"If I don't hear from him, I'll assume things aren't so bad now, and will keep to my plans. Anyway, I'll be getting a letter to him. Do you think you could pass that message along?"

"But of course."

2

I had met Roberto when I first visited Paraguay in 1972, to conduct research on a Fulbright-Hays doctoral dissertation fellowship. Because the U.S. Congress funds the national scholarship program, Fulbright scholars travel abroad under government auspices. In practice, this semiofficial status means automatic acceptance by the American community, endless invitations to diplomatic parties to meet the host county's dignitaries, and introductions to local notables who can help you out.

Roberto, then the editor-in-chief of Paraguay's principal newspaper, was one of the first contacts set up by the U.S. Embassy. We hit it off right away and he extended me every courtesy: from the use of a desk in the city room to having an after-work beer with other Paraguayan professionals. In fact, it was thanks to Roberto that I came to know Dr. Filártiga.

Unlike in the United States, in Latin American countries history plays an overtly political role. Indeed, the tradition of publishing historical essays in newspapers often is used by these governments to create a "usable past"—to foster nationalism and buttress their legitimacy with the real, or invented, glories of their country's history.

In any event, in 1973 Roberto published a lengthy article of mine on the Jesuit Missions of Paraguay, in four consecutive *ABC Color* Sunday Supplements. After read-

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ing the first installment, Joel stopped by the newspaper to check out the rest of the essay.

Dr. Filártiga, who is also an accomplished artist, evidently liked the remaining three installments. On the spot, he appropriated Roberto's desk, and he made pen-and-ink drawings, graphically capturing the articles' central themes.

After seeing Filártiga's drawings, I was delighted and wanted to meet him. However, not until two years later, when I next returned to Paraguay, did we get together.

By then, mid-1975, Roberto's political fortunes had taken a turn for the worse. Sacked from his job at *ABC Color* for exposing a particularly sensitive case of government corruption, he had been arrested, imprisoned, and tortured by Investigaciones, the Paraguayan political police. As further punishment, General Alfredo Stroessner had also banned him from practicing his profession.

Even though the dictator prohibited Roberto from working as a journalist, the owner of the newspaper continued to pay his regular salary for a year. So we worked out a deal in which Roberto would translate my dissertation into Spanish and *ABC Color* would serialize the entire work in its Sunday Supplements.

One afternoon shortly after we began working together, Roberto showed up at my place with two strangers. One, a well-dressed, handsome teenager, hung back, appraising me with friendly, if somewhat reserved, curiosity.

The other, a middle-aged man exuding a confident good humor, openly sized me up. His goatee and girth contributed to a Hemingway-like presence, and his glistening coffee irises comfortably locked onto my eyes.

"Richard," Roberto began, "I'd like to introduce Dr. Filártiga and his son Joelito. They've—"

"So this is the Yanqui," the vibrant stranger broke in with a smile, "who dares to write the history of our country?"

"And you can only be," I quipped back, "that audacious artist who had the gall to doctor it when I wasn't looking."

And for the rest of the day, there went my disciplined writing schedule.

3

We settled under the enormous mango tree that shaded the front yard of my house. I told Joel about the materials I had found in the National Archives, which gave the lie to the traditional history books that berated Paraguay's founding father as the archetypical Latin American tyrant. I went on about how Dr. Francia—the George Washington of Paraguay—was really a populist who championed the common people at the expense of the privileged classes, those same elites who had gone on to write their embittered version of history.

Joel told me about the rural clinic he ran, the only private medical facility in the village of Ybycuí, eighty miles outside the capital. He explained how, after graduating from medical school eighteen years before, his decision to become a country doctor had scandalized Asunción society, all but branding him a traitor to his class. Why, people openly questioned, would this son of such an old and distinguished family, this brilliant

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young physician, shun a lucrative medical career in the capital, electing instead to tend to peasants in the impoverished countryside?

As our friendship grew, I asked Filártiga to read the manuscript of *Paraguay's Autonomous Revolution* and to compose pen-and-ink drawings for each chapter. He invited me to visit his clinic.

As much as my work benefited from Joel's artistic contributions, my visits to Ybycuí proved to be of far greater value. There I found a world that otherwise I would never have known. And it was there that I grew to know the Filártiga family.

Nidia, at thirty-eight, was five years younger than her husband. Possessing inexhaustible energy, she seemed to be in constant motion. As the clinic's administrator and head nurse, Nidia tackled the endless problems of keeping a developing-world rural medical facility on track. No task was too menial—she spent hours everyday cooking and washing—or overly daunting—assisting Dr. Filártiga from the most routine procedure to major surgery.

Generally unaware of the admiration of the staff and patients, Nidia did recognize the necessity of deliberately downplaying her physical beauty. Otherwise, authentic human contact with the peasants they served, people who already held the Filártigas in awe, became all but impossible.

Only on those rare occasions when we would go to a restaurant would Nidia put aside her drab work clothes. Bringing out her fetching appearance, she let out her blond hair, highlighted her bottle-green eyes with a touch of makeup, and displayed her trim figure in a dress left over from her upper-class youth.

Nidia quickly, and completely, won me over.

Dolly, a strong-willed young woman, and at nineteen the eldest of the Filártiga children, worked alongside her parents in all aspects of clinic life. Some months before we met, however, partly in search of greater independence from her father—who indeed was capable of being a stern taskmaster—Dolly had decided to spend the weekdays at the family house in Asunción, where she could take advantage of the better educational opportunities.

At fourteen, Analy, the quietest of the children, also did her share of the work. And another helper, Katia, at eleven the baby of the family, brightened a room simply with her sparkling presence.

4

The clinic itself can only be described as a marvel of necessity. Nothing was wasted. For bandages, threadbare sheets were cut up and disinfected in boiling water, over and over, until they literally fell apart. Even gauze and disposable syringes, after being sterilized, were reused.

Dr. Filártiga's workload consisted of twenty to thirty consultations a day, as well as averaging several major procedures or operations a week. And while he kept rudimentary patient records on card files, not even an informal bookkeeping system existed. In any event, there was no real need for one. Joel personally knew each of his patients, almost without exception peasant farmers eking out a subsistence living. For those few who

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had any spare cash, he adjusted his fees according to an informal sliding scale based upon their ability to pay.

Basically, though, the clinic operated on an exchange-of-services basis. Almost everyone contributed in kind: bringing a chicken or some vegetables, chopping wood, digging a new well, helping out with the cooking and laundry, making repairs, or adding on a new room. "In my whole life here," Joel told me, "I have never had to buy anything to eat. And the clinic, under my direction, has been built by the peasants with their work."

Over the years, the clinic had grown from two small rooms to a modest compound. By 1975, it consisted of the Filártigas' living quarters, a combination consultation and examination room, an operating room, a workshop, an institutional-sized kitchen, and three hospital-type rooms, accommodating several patients each. As is customary throughout Latin America, even in most respectable hospitals, relatives of the patients attend to their nonmedical needs, such as serving their meals, washing them, and helping them to the toilet.

Patients began arriving before dawn. Many came from the distant reaches of the Ybycuí Valley, often spending five or six hours traveling in rickety, old, ox-drawn carts to reach the clinic.

Occasionally, there were others who came quietly in the middle of the night. For the security of all concerned, these people did not mix with the regular patients. They received medical treatment and, if necessary, convalesced in the semiprivacy of the Filártigas' living quarters. They departed as discretely as they arrived.

Ordinarily, though, barring life-or-death emergencies, the people gathered in the front yard, softly talking among themselves in Guaraní, stoically waiting for Dr. Filártiga to open up at 6:00 A.M.

Paraguay is the only officially bilingual country in Latin America. Spanish is the language of government and commerce; Guaraní is the native Indian tongue, spoken by the vast majority of the population, especially in the *campo* where most people have, at best, a cursory knowledge of Spanish. An insight into Paraguay's bilingual culture can be seen in the saying: "One makes business in Spanish—and love in Guaraní."

It is also true that one gets sick in Guaraní. Many times I would hear Dr. Filártiga speaking Spanish with a patient, only to shift to Guaraní as soon as they began the medical consultation.

Watching people arrive at the clinic, I noticed that a few, like the mayor of Ybycuí, dressed in middle-class garb. But these were the exception. Peasants, clothed in sweat-stained hand-me-downs, made up the vast majority of Filártiga's patients.

One morning, as I helped lift a man curled up in pain from the back of an ox cart, my eyes fixed upon the inch-thick, deeply gouged soles of his bare feet. The realization struck me that he had never worn shoes; that a lifetime of working in the fields had so deformed his feet that, should he somehow find the money to buy a pair of footwear, his gnarled feet could never fit in them.

5

That afternoon I saw Joel explode in frustration. In his cluttered office after lunch, he was telling me about the chronic medical problems he treated. Filártiga blamed the

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dictatorship's indifference for many of his patients' ailments. He explained how not only the myriad of maladies stemming from undernourishment and contaminated water—such as gastric enteritis and parasites—but also tuberculosis and leprosy, easily could be prevented through basic public health programs.

Rather naively, I questioned what was being done.

"What do you think?" he replied wearily. "So long as General Stroessner and his mafia run Paraguay only for their own personal benefit, without a care about the misery and death their greed causes, what can be done?"

"Well," I said, "have you tried contacting any of the international health organizations?"

"Richard, you do not understand." Joel sighed and sat back behind his desk. "I will give you one small example of the way things work here. A few years ago, the big cotton growers began using Folodol M60. It is a very powerful insecticide to protect their crops. And it works very well. There are no more cotton blights. And they are making more profit than ever.

"But it is also a very potent toxin. And the people who must work those fields day after day, week after week, year after year, end up poisoned. Many get sick. Some die!

"Here—I will show you." Leaping to his feet, Filártiga began rummaging through the drawers of a cabinet. "Never mind, I will tell you," he said in growing frustration, apparently unable to find the patient records he sought.

"Now, I have all these cases of appendicitis and spontaneous abortions. And almost all of them are workers from the cotton fields!" He slammed his fist down on the desk. "This never was the case before they started using Folodol M60. And last year alone, three people died!"

"So what's being done about it?"

"What is being done?" he exclaimed, his frustration bursting to the surface. "Nothing, absolutely nothing. That is what is being done. Stroessner's on the side of the greedy growers. The government does absolutely nothing to control them."

Flushed with emotion, Joel paused for a deep breath, and then went on. "I wrote a letter to the minister of health. Nothing happened. I wrote letters to the newspapers. None of them dared publish them. I have talked with other doctors. They say they have the same problems. I tell everyone I talk to, and nothing changes. The big cotton growers just go on using more and more agritoxins. And more and more poisoned workers arrive at the clinic. And some of them die!"

Anchored behind his desk, gripping its oaken bulk, he finally calmed down. Then, with a touch of resignation in his voice, he chided, "Well, so now you know what is not being done. And even worse, what cannot be done."

6

The people's esteem for Dr. Filártiga far surpassed the respect usually accorded small-town physicians. They not only depended upon Joel for their medical needs but regarded him as their political champion as well. For more than two decades, since Stroessner seized power in the 1954 military coup, so many people had been tortured

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and murdered for attempting to better their lot that they had long since abandoned any illusion as to their fate should they openly oppose the dictatorship.

Even Dr. Filártiga, whose upper-class background afforded him a good deal of protection, was not immune. Three times he had been arrested and tortured. The last time, in 1966, accused of giving medical aid to members of an armed resistance movement cost him weeks of beatings and electric shocks. And, of course, the inevitable dips in the *pileta*.

Pileta is Spanish for swimming pool. In the lexicon of Paraguayan torture, however, it is a bathtub filled with vomit, urine, feces, blood, and other bodily fluids in which victims—usually under the supervision of a police physician—are immersed, until they lose consciousness. Only to be revived, and torment to begin all over again.

Fortunately, at the time Filártiga's mother, Lidia, held the influential post of president of the Women's Auxiliary of Stroessner's Colorado Party. To her horror, she learned that the ominous green X, which marked those slated for execution, appeared next to her son's name on the prisoner list.

Lidia begged, bribed, and cajoled her powerful contacts in the regime until she got Joel's death status rescinded, and his sentence reduced to internal exile. For nine months Filártiga languished in the remote hamlet of Mbuyapey, where each morning he was required to report to the police station. During his banishment, the people of Ybycuí held weekly Masses to pray for the safe return of their maverick physician-artist-philanthropist-champion.

7

The people's love of their doctor's son equaled that for his father. In some ways, it was even more intimate because Joelito did not carry the baggage of his father's awesome status. Joelito had grown up with these people. And, in the lapses caused by the activist lifestyle of his parents, the people of Ybycuí became something akin to a second, extended family that raised him. He knew and fully accepted them; they knew and fully accepted him: embracing him as one of their own, teaching him their culture and wisdom.

Joelito enthusiastically pitched in with all tasks around the clinic. Because of his mechanical aptitude, he spent a good deal of time repairing equipment and serving as the clinic's driver—delivering medicines and checking on the progress of patients, bringing to the clinic people too ill to make it on their own, especially those from the outlying regions of the Ybycuí Valley.

Early one morning as I accompanied Joelito on his rounds, we came across a pickup soccer game. Joelito pulled over and, jumping out, said, "Come on. Let's go kick the ball around a while."

I tried to beg off. "I've never played soccer in my life. I don't even know the rules."

"You don't know how to play soccer?" He looked at me in amazement. "Everybody plays soccer. Come on. Let's go."

"No. Look, I'm serious," I persisted, "I'd just spoil the game. When I was growing up we played another kind of football, American football. And that was a long time ago."

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"How old are you anyway?" he asked.

"Thirty."

"See. You're not so old." Joelito broke into that easy, open laugh of youth. "Come on. It doesn't matter. Don't be afraid."

And then, as if it resolved everything, he added, "They're all my friends. It doesn't matter. They won't mind. You're my friend, too. Come on. It'll be fun. Let's go!"

It was fun.

8

When we got back to the clinic, Dr. Filártiga had just finished a grueling three-hour cesarean section on Señora Mariana Brizuela. Even as Mariana still lay unconscious, recovering from the anesthesia, Joelito began cleaning up the operating room.

I followed Joel into to the living room where, with an exhausted sigh, he flopped on the sofa. "A delicate operation," he said. "The baby was—"

"Papi, Papi, come quick!" Joelito shouted, bursting into the room, "Señora Brizuela's dead!"

With the surprising agility some heavyset men possess, Dr. Filártiga sprang from the sofa and ran to the operating room. I noted Mariana's lack of breathing, her chalky death pallor, and silently agreed with Joelito—obviously she was dead.

Seeing the alarm on Dr. Filártiga's face was confirmation. But, not visible to me, his medical sixth sense was kicking in.

While furiously spinning the hand crank that tilted the old operating table to lower Mariana's head, Filártiga began snapping out orders. "Nidia, bring five milligrams of Levofed. Now! Prepare another five of adrenaline. And the same of Doca! Hurry!"

By the time the table was fully repositioned, Nidia had two of the hypodermic needles ready. "But," she explained, "there's no Doca."

What followed appeared more like a choreographed show than a life-and-death medical emergency.

In one continuous motion, Filártiga swooped the first syringe from Nidia's outstretched hand and plunged it through the plastic IV bottle of saline solution already inserted in Mariana's vein. And, as Nidia injected the adrenaline in her other arm, he instructed her, "We'll use Effortil instead of Doca. It's almost the same generic composition."

A moment later, as Filártiga checked Mariana's pulse with one hand, Nidia placed the Effortil syringe in his other. Without breaking stride, he jabbed it deep into Mariana's buttock. Then, with Joelito holding her steady, he balled both hands into fists and began external cardiac massage, a procedure he continued for the next half hour while Nidia and Joelito took turns wiping away the sweat running down his face.

At last, Mariana began breathing, her blood pressure rose, she opened her eyes. "Doctor, how is my baby?"

"He is perfect. A fine, healthy boy." Flexing his hands to restore circulation, Filártiga continued checking her blood pressure and pulse. "And how do you feel, Mariana?"

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"Tired. A little sore," she answered groggily. Small wonder. Mariana was still strapped to the tilted operating table and, in fact, would have to remain in that position for the next four hours.

"Can I go to my room now? I want to see my baby and my husband," she pleaded.

"Not just now, my daughter," Dr. Filártiga said. "You have had a hard time. Your blood pressure is still low. I am going to keep you here for a little while longer. Somebody will be with you all the time. Now go back to sleep and rest."

Returning to the living room, I asked Joel, "What happened to Mariana? When I first saw her, she sure looked dead to me."

"Almost. Another few minutes and I do not think that the Levofed and Effortil could have raised her blood pressure in time. She came very close."

Once again collapsing on the sofa, he lit his pipe and explained in detail. "Mariana suffers chronic low blood pressure. With the excessive loss of liquids when she gave birth, she went into acute circulatory shock. It is a very severe condition. The body temperature and blood pressure drop drastically. And this cuts off the circulation of blood to the brain. The patient then enters into a coma, and the heart stops. It was very close.

"To be truthful," he finished, "at first I did not think she would live. It was a miracle."

Yes, I thought, a miracle. A miracle that you left the city and set up your clinic in this remote village. A miracle that you immediately diagnosed Mariana's condition and knew what to do. A miracle that, because of the years practicing medicine with chronic shortages of medicines, you have developed an encyclopedic knowledge of their generic compositions and substituted Effortil when there was no Doca. A miracle that Nidia, without any formal training, has become a most incredibly competent operating room nurse. And a miracle that young Joelito, while scrubbing the operating room instruments, kept a conscientious eye on Señora Brizuela and told you as soon as she went into shock.

Yes, I thought, a miracle.

9

At first, Joelito would stop by my place to deliver one of his father's drawings, or to drop off a bottle of molasses or a chunk of cheese that Nidia sent from Ybycuí. Then he began just coming over without any special reason.

Much like at the clinic, Joelito naturally slipped into helping out around my rented house in Asunción—stacking firewood, repairing a leaky faucet, and generally doing what ever needed to be done. It did not take long to develop an independent friendship of our own.

Everyone knows a Joelito—an easygoing, secure young man with the aura of a natural leader. In Joelito I saw one of those special people who, as he made his way through life, was sure to fulfill his promise.

Despite the difference in age, Joelito's openness pretty much precluded taboo subjects between us. I asked him what his father thought of the Playboy Bunny sticker he had plastered on the rear window of the family car.

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"Oh, he complains that it's embarrassing. You know how serious Papi is. But when he tells me to take it off, I just laugh, and ask him that if it's so bad then why doesn't he take it off himself? Then he laughs, too. And we both end up laughing about it."

"Do you have any idea," I said, "how lucky you are to be able to laugh like that with your father?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, genuinely perplexed.

"Look, most fathers just boss their kids around. It's a lot easier than putting up with all the hassle of treating you with respect, like a real person. I never laughed like that with my father."

"You mean you and your father weren't friends?" he asked incredulously.

"Friends? No, you couldn't say we were friends," I told him and changed the subject. "Anyway, what do you plan to do with the last 700 months of your life?"

"Seven hundred months?"

"Sure. You're sixteen now," I said. "If you live to the average age of seventy or so, that's about fifty-five years, about 700 months."

Joelito took a moment to absorb the new concept. "That's an awful long time. Too long to worry about," he laughed.

"I know a lot about how bad things are here and I'm going to help change them. But I want to be successful and happy, too. Not like Papi. He's always angry about something.

"He says that you can't be successful and good at the same time here in Paraguay. He says to become wealthy you have to prostitute yourself and work with the dictatorship. To be good you have to suffer and fight."

"So how about you?" I pressed. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to be a doctor like Papi. And an architect, too," Joelito said. "And I want to be an artist like Papi, because you can make changes with art, too.

"You've seen my drawings. What do you think?" he asked without a trace of self-consciousness.

"They're really good," I told him truthfully. Joelito's talent was already pressing the limits of his father's instruction, his drawing taking on a distinctive style of his own.

"And what about you?" Joelito asked. "What are you going to do with your last 500 months?"

Somewhat taken aback by his agile math, a few beats passed before I answered. "Well, in a couple of weeks I'll be going back to UCLA to finish up my dissertation, the book that Roberto translated and your father made the drawings for.

"Then, I hope to come back here to work on another book. After that, I don't know. Probably teach at some university."

"You're just like Papi. Always working. Always so serious. Will you be happy being a professor?"

Again I stalled, half toying with the idea of weaseling out from giving an honest answer to Joelito.

"You know," I said, "I don't even think about being happy anymore. Somehow that has just slipped away."

"See. You and Papi need more happiness."

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10

Throughout that exceptionally raw Paraguayan winter of 1975, Filártiga and I spent many evenings relaxing near the warmth of my fireplace. Our discussions ranged from art and history to philosophy, from United States foreign policy to world politics, from the practice of medicine in Paraguay to the inner workings of Stroessner's dictatorship.

"Richard," Joel explained, "I will tell you a good way to begin understanding how Stroessner and his cronies function. Imagine that your mafia gained control of an entire country—that they became the government.

"That is why Paraguay, with a population of less than three million, is the world's largest importer of American cigarettes. Of course very few remain here, because they are smuggled into countries all around South America."

Filártiga paused long enough to light his pipe. "It is said that smuggling is Paraguay's biggest business. It makes perfect sense when you add in the whisky, narcotics, electronics, perfumes, and all the other luxury goods.

"There even is a traffic in rare animals—flamingos from Argentina, panthers from the jungles of Brazil, other endangered species protected by international treaties. Rich people in Paris and New York pay exorbitant prices to impress their friends with such exotic pets."

"Government-sponsored organized crime," I agreed, throwing a piece of wood on the fire. "It really is like a mafia setup."

"Yes. But worse. Because they have the power of a sovereign nation-state. So who is to stop them? They can get away with anything."

"Anything?"

"Anything," Filártiga insisted. "Even selling Paraguayan citizenship to Nazi war criminals. It is no secret. I have seen the naturalization papers of Dr. Josef Mengele"—the Angel of Death from Auschwitz concentration camp.

11

Of course, it took more than corruption to hold together Stroessner's gangster regime. I asked Joel about the secret police.

"Investigaciones are entirely separate from the Army," he explained. "Not that one is less vicious than the other. Stroessner plays them off against each other, promoting a rivalry. In fact, the political police are so powerful that they serve as a check against the possibility of a military coup.

"The *campo* is mostly left to the Army, the urban centers to Investigaciones. Like the old Nazi Gestapo, their primary purpose is to repress political dissent. But both rely on a vast network of *pyragués*."

"*Pyragués?*"

"Informers. The human pestilence that permeates the fabric of Paraguayan society," he said. "According to an old Guaraní legend, the *pyragué* is a mythical being. His feet are encased in thick mats of hair, so he can silently sneak up to your house at night and listen in on your secrets.

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"*Pyragués* are everywhere. They can be waiters in restaurants, household servants, taxi drivers, shoeshine boys. Whatever they hear or see, they report to Investigaciones. They get paid even for passing on rumors. You do not have to be a 'subversive' to be arrested. Just suspicion can be enough."

"What do you have to do to become a suspect?" I asked.

"There is no clear line," Filártiga said. "Sometimes just speaking out against the regime is enough. When workers try to form a union, or peasants join together in an agricultural cooperative, that certainly is enough. But lots of times nothing is enough."

"Nothing? Nothing is enough?"

"You never know," Joel said. "Let me tell you about my old friend Alberto Carlés."

Filártiga drew closer to the fire. "Alberto is an economist. We grew up together. We went to school together. I am the godfather of his first son. But we do not see much of each other anymore. We do not even celebrate the holidays together—not because we do not want to, but because it could cause suspicion.

"If I must see him, I always park my car a few blocks away from his house. He does the same. Otherwise, the *pyragués* would eventually notice a pattern."

In a calm, matter-of-fact tone, he went on. "You know I do not belong to any political party. But I am known as a dissident. Maybe someday I will be arrested again. And then Alberto could be arrested too. For nothing. Because we are friends and spend time together. That could be enough.

"It is a way to terrorize the people. And it works. That is why we say that here in Paraguay, people 'walk with fear.' "

12

Stoking the fire, I contemplated life in Paraguay's police state. Misconstruing my concern for apprehension, Joel tried to allay my anxiety.

"Oh, you have got nothing to worry about. You are a Yanqui. They do not treat Yanquis like they do Paraguayans. Your embassy would cause too much trouble. And Stroessner needs United States support to stay in power.

"The only way that they would take you is if they caught you red-handed, working with an armed resistance group. Now that would be a triumph. They would have a foreigner to prove their international communist conspiracy. Then, for sure, you would be a guest of Investigaciones."

"No. That's not what I'm thinking," I said, perhaps laughing a bit too loudly. "Actually, I was thinking about something we might arrange when I get back to UCLA."

Joel did not say anything, but his body language perked up.

"What do you think?" I suggested. "Maybe we could get you invited to the university as a guest lecturer, give an art exhibition, talk about your work at the clinic?"

13

Four months later, in January 1976, Joel arrived in Los Angeles. Allyn Sinderbrand, who, while visiting me in Paraguay, had come to admire Filártiga had taken charge of

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the preparations. She had enlisted volunteer students and faculty, putting together a team whose advance work would have done a presidential candidate proud. Leaving the airport, she showed Joel one of the publicity leaflets.

14

Joel's visit to California exploded into a whirlwind of activity. The *Los Angeles Times* and both major Spanish newspapers—*Los Angeles Express* and *La Opinión*—ran feature articles. The local NBC television station aired a lengthy news special, "The Albert Schweitzer of Latin America." And an independent filmmaker, Jim Richardson, took it upon himself to produce a short documentary that portrayed Dr. Filártiga and his work.

Momentum snowballed. Joel received more invitations to speak and exhibit his art at private homes, churches, and other universities. Meeting with colleagues at UCLA, the University of Southern California, and the City of Hope's medical complex, he collected donations of medical supplies. And, in a flash of inspiration, he renamed his clinic in Paraguay the SANATORIO LA ESPERANZA—CLINIC OF HOPE.

The attention even enveloped Filártiga personally. A dentist friend sat him down for a marathon six-hour overhaul of his mouth, and a professor of medicine at one of the area's medical centers ran him through an exhaustive physical examination.

To provide Filártiga and his work with continuing support, the informal network of people coalesced into the "Paraguay Project." We arranged a series of successful fund-raisers; like the art exhibition held at the home of Leonard Nimoy—Mr. Spock of *Star Trek* fame—who graciously refrained from even raising an eyebrow as we took his Picassos off the walls to hang up the Filártigas.

Along with the impressive amount of medical supplies, we raised $5,000 to purchase a new Packard Bell cardioscope and defibrillator for the clinic, the first such sophisticated medical technology in Paraguay outside the capital of Asunción.

On his return trip, Filártiga stopped in Mexico City and Buenos Aires—where other friends organized yet more lectures and art exhibitions. He finally arrived home in late February to a hero's welcome. While we were delighted to learn of the television and newspaper coverage extolling his triumphant international tour, the *ABC Color* feature article—which led off with a reproduction of the UCLA leaflet announcing Filártiga's lecture, "Art as Social Criticism in Latin America"—caused a pang of apprehension.

The final results of Joel's medical examination had been mailed to his house after the test and, to no one's great surprise, had arrived opened. Overall, finding Filártiga's health satisfactory, the report sternly warned that "the combination of your overweight condition and your incipient coronary artery disease makes you a candidate for serious and possibly fatal heart disease."

The medical report went on to say that Filártiga should lose twenty to thirty pounds as soon as possible and, most emphatically, "avoid all stress, both physical and emotional."

In a backhanded way, Filártiga felt that the news of his heart disease could prove beneficial. For, together with his rising international prominence, it might serve as a restraint against the police arresting and torturing him again.

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It was a sound assumption. The torturer's job is not to kill the victim. The purpose of torture is to break the prisoner's will, perhaps to extract information, certainly to so debase the victims that they abandon their "subversive" activities and cower before the power of the police state. In fact, the inadvertent death of a "client" is the torturer's worst possible blunder, a professional disgrace.

To make sure that everyone knew the score, Filártiga all but advertised his heart condition. In keeping with his absentminded reputation, as he hustled through his hectic schedule of interviews and appearances, he would often leave behind copies of his California medical report.

15

In early March, the Paraguay Project people in LA and I began receiving disturbing press clippings and letters from Filártiga and other Paraguayan friends. The dictatorship, announcing the emergence of an armed resistance group, had launched another of its periodic waves of repression. Because of the anti-Stroessner implications of my book, *ABC Color* had backed out of the arrangement to serialize it. But then the Catholic University agreed to publish the entire work in its academic journal. And, though I might find a less than heartfelt welcome when I returned to Paraguay in a few months, it was Filártiga's immediate safety that most concerned everyone.

As a precaution, I wrote the London Secretariat of Amnesty International. I sent Amnesty biographical information on Filártiga and myself, as well as the names, addresses, and phone numbers of several Paraguayan opposition leaders to contact in the event of our arrest or disappearance.

In early April I received a reply from Amnesty's Campaign for the Abolition of Torture. Dick Oosting, the joint campaign organizer, said, "It goes without saying that if we were to receive word of you or your colleagues/friends having landed into trouble in Paraguay, we will try to do what we can, and as quickly as possible. I hope you realize, though, that one cannot expect wonders from Amnesty interventions, whatever the level or quantity."

Oosting's candor was a bit sobering, though hardly unexpected. What came next, however, was something of a surprise. "I have passed copies of your letters and enclosures to Edy Kaufman, the researcher responsible for Paraguay, and he will write to you separately," Oosting told me. "I hope all will go well, and hope that it will be possible for you to assist us in our work on Paraguay, as much as your other commitments allow you to do so. I am sure Edy will have a few questions in this respect!"

I had not expected to be recruited by Amnesty, but that was just fine with me—in fact, more than fine. Anticipating Kaufman's letter, I wrote him with a few questions of my own and offered to do what I could to help out. Shortly before I departed for Paraguay, his reply arrived.

"Many thanks for your letter of 7 April and the very kind offer of assistance during your stay in Paraguay. This will undoubtedly be invaluable to us," Kaufman wrote. "The innocuous address to which you can write to us is: 77 Dorchester Place, London

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NW1," he told me, before offering his "Many best wishes for your forthcoming trip (and safe return)."

Of course, by the time Kaufman's letter reached me in Los Angeles, I had received Dr. Filártiga's letter. Yet, because the circumstances surrounding Joelito's murder remained so vague, there was little chance of getting Amnesty involved at this early stage. In any event, we had already mobilized the many friends and admirers Dr. Filártiga had made on his visit to California just two months before. Spontaneously, people took up a collection, and they gave me the proceeds to deliver to Joel upon my arrival in Paraguay.

Far more important, scores of condolence letters went out to the Filártigas from the Paraguay Project people. We organized a telegram and letter-writing campaign to members of Congress, as well as officials in the Ford administration; and we made certain that General Stroessner received copies of all the correspondence. To provide a measure of protection, it was essential to impress upon the dictator that now, more than ever, Filártiga could be counted on for unconditional support.

I still did not understand what had happened to Joelito, and I was equally in the dark about the Filártigas' situation. On May 13, after spending a few days with friends and family in New England, I boarded the first leg of Braniff's infamous fifteen-hour milk run down the spine of South America to Paraguay.

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