

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

The most brutal morning of his life started with interrupted sleep – the relatives were arriving. He was happy, it was visible, a rather groggy happiness due to his insomnia the night before, plus the shots of whisky, the intensity of the event, the series of little oddities in that official space that wasn't his. Once again he wasn't at home, and now there was an estrangement in everything, as if it were he, rather than his wife, who'd pushed the child out of his very guts – the good, but irremediable feeling started to give way to an invisible anguish that seemed to breathe with him. Perhaps he, like some women in the shock of childbirth, didn't want the child he had, but the idea was just a shadow. After all, he was just an unemployed man and now he had a child. Period. It was no longer just an idea, nor the mere desire to please that his poem represented, the ridiculous son of spring – it was the absence of everything. But the relatives were full of cheer, all talking over one another. The tension of waking up in a daze was fading by the minute. What does he

look like? I don't know, he's all crumpled. He said what people always say about newborns to get a laugh, and it worked. The baby's chubby, big, strong; he made it up. It was what they wanted to hear. Yes, everything's fine. Everyone needs to see him, but it seems there are visiting hours. He'll be here soon – that little bundle of sighs. His wife was placid in the hospital bed – yes, yes, everything's fine. There was also a laundry list of advice all at once – everyone had something crucial to say about a child that was born, especially to idiot parents like himself. I took a course for dads, he warned, clowning with them. But it was true. He'd spent an afternoon in a large circle of big-bellied women, his wife included, of course, with two or three other devoted future fathers, keenly following a basic lecture from a kindly doctor, and the only thing he could remember of it all was a single piece of advice – it was wise to maintain good relations with mothers-in-law, because parents sometimes needed a break from their children, to get out for dinner from time to time, to try to recapture a little of the feel of how things used to be that was never coming back.

And the families talked and made suggestions (teas, herbs, remedies, infusions, what to do with milk). He needs a smack to make him cry out loud as soon as he's born, someone said, and someone said no, the world's changed and smacking a baby is stupid (though they didn't use this word). Aren't they going to bring the baby? What time was he born? What did the doctor say? What about you, what did you do? What happened? Why didn't you say anything beforehand? Why didn't you call anyone? What if something had

happened? Has he got a name yet? Yes. Felipe. The relatives were in high spirits, but he was suddenly tired and felt a pang of his old, insoluble anxiety being reborn. He wanted to go home once and for all and reestablish a good routine, because he'd soon have books to write – he wanted to delve into *Essay on Passion* again, something to get out of here, out of this small temporary world. Yes, and have a beer, of course! That was a good idea – and he almost glanced about for some company so he could really talk about this day, organize this day, think about it, literarily, as a rebirth – look, my life has a new meaning now, he'd say, weighing his words; I need to get organized so I can establish a new routine and survive in peace with my dream. A child is like – and he smiled, alone, the idiot, amidst the relatives – like a certificate of authenticity, he'd venture; and he floated off again in a Rousseauian dream of communion with nature, which had never really been his own but which he'd absorbed like a mantra and was afraid to let go of – without one last link, what was left? Everywhere else other people had authority, not him. The only free territory was that of literature, he might have dreamed had he managed to think about it. Yes, he needed to call his old guru, somehow get his blessing. Many years later a student would tell him, in writing, why he wasn't given to intimacy: you give others the impression you're always on the defensive. Primal feelings tumbling over one another – he still didn't understand a thing, but life was good. He still didn't know that here began a different marriage with his wife for the simple fact that they had a child together. He didn't know anything yet.

Suddenly the door opened and two doctors came in, the pediatrician and the obstetrician, and one of them was holding a bundle. They were surprisingly serious, absurdly serious, heavy, for such a happy moment – they looked like generals. There were about ten people in the room, and his wife was awake. It was an abrupt entry, violent even – with quick, decisive steps, they each went to one side of the bed, where they stood, erect: his wife watched as her child was deposited before her like an offering, but no one smiled. They came like high priests. In times past, one of them would have brought down his dagger in one fell swoop to spill the creature’s guts and tear out the future. Five seconds of silence. Everyone froze – a sudden, electric, brutal, paralyzing tension pierced their souls, while one of the doctors unwrapped the baby on the bed. These were the stages of an instantaneous ritual that was created and which created its own gestures and rules, immediately respected. Everyone waited.

There was the beginning of a speech, almost religious, which he, reeling, still couldn’t grasp except in fragments of the pediatrician’s voice.

“...certain characteristics... important signs... look. See the eyes, the fold of skin in the inside corner of the eyelid, the slant... the little finger curved inwards... the back of the cranium is flatter... muscular hypotonia... the lower-set ears and...”

He immediately remembered his friend’s Master’s thesis in genetics. He’d revised it two months earlier and the characteristics of trisomy 21, known as Down syndrome, or, more crudely, back in the 80s, “mongolism,”

the subject of the thesis, were still fresh in his mind. He'd talked with his friend several times about aspects of the thesis and curiosities of the study (one that suddenly sprang to mind was the first question an Arabic family had asked when told of the problem: "Will he be able to have children?" Which seemed funny, like another cartoon). It was thus, in a split second, in the grips of the biggest spin of his life, the only one, strictly speaking, that he didn't have time (and wouldn't for the rest of his life) to domesticate in a literary representation, he learned the power of the expression "forever" – the idea that some things really were irremediable, and the absolute, but obvious feeling that there was no turning back time, something he'd always refused to accept. Everything could be started over, but not now; everything could be redone, but not this; everything could go back to nothing and remake itself, but now everything had a granite-like, insurmountable solidity. The last limit, that of innocence, had been crossed; his stubbornly prolonged childhood ended here, feeling faint to his very core, reeling backwards, not hearing another word of the doctors' stupid babble, just remembering the thesis he'd read line by line, painstakingly correcting syntactical and stylistic details here and there, amused by the curiosities that described, with the cold, exact power of science, his child's essence. Which was this word: "mongoloid."

He refused to go further forward on the timeline and struggled to stay in the second before the revelation, like a cow bucking in the narrow isle of the slaughterhouse; he refused to actually look at the bed, where everyone had trained their gaze in brute silence, the shock of an unexpected curse. This was

worse than anything else, he concluded – not even death would have this power to destroy me. Death calls for seven days of grieving, and life goes on. But not now. This will never end. He took two, three steps back until he bumped into the red sofa and looked out the window, to the other side, upwards, in a bovine refusal to see and hear. It wasn't tears of sorrow that were building up, but something mixed with a furious kind of hatred. He was unable to fully turn against his wife, which was perhaps his first wish and first alibi (he still refused to look at her); some residue of civility, something curbed his urge to be violent, and at the same time he felt a deep certainty, which was both revenge and an escape valve – the truly scientific certainty, he remembered (as if raising an irrefutable trump card to show the world, I know, I've read about it, I don't need your stories), the only correlation that could be drawn about the causes of mongolism, the only proven variable was the mother's age and hereditary predisposition, and also (in the same dead-end suffering, gazing at the blue sky on the other side of the window) he remembered how some years earlier they had sought genetic counseling about the possibility of their children inheriting (if dominant or recessive) his wife's retinal degeneration, a serious, but bearable visual limitation that had stabilized when she was a child. He refused. By refusing: he didn't look at the bed, he didn't look at his son, he didn't look at his wife, he didn't look at the relatives, he didn't look at the doctors – he felt a terrible shame of his son and was certain he'd feel the vertigo of hell every minute of his life from there on.

No one was prepared for their first child, he tried to think, defensively, much less a child like that, something he simply couldn't transform into a son.

When he finally turned to look at the bed, there was no one left in the room – just him, his wife, and the child in her arms. He couldn't bring himself to look at his son. Yes – his soul was still bucking, looking for a solution, since it wasn't possible to turn the clock back five minutes. But no one was condemned to be what they were, he realized, as if he had seen the philosopher's stone: I don't need this child, he actually thought, and it was as if the thought put him on his feet again, albeit stumbling step by step into darkness. I don't need this woman either, he almost added, in a mental dialogue without a listener: as always, he was alone.

*Translated by Alison Entrekin*