

PART I

BELONGING

TO THE

EMPEROR

1 MR. MACHI LEANS BACK into his armchair, sinks his hand into the blond mane moving rhythmically between his legs, and shuts his eyes. The first rays of morning sun filter through the window in a triangle, making the fountain pen shimmer as they descend over the desk, with its two half-empty glasses, the miniature of Norberto Fontana's Dodge, the antique telephone, the open bindle, the mound of coke, the credit card with its edges frosted from use, and the dirty ashtray, before coming to rest on a framed family photo of Mr. Machi, ten years younger, smiling next to his two children and his wife on a Mediterranean beach. When the vertex of the luminous triangle touches the blond mane, its movements become less rhythmic, following along with the spasms shaking the body of Mr. Machi, who grabs a fistful of blond hair as an orgasm roars out of him with muffled snorts. Then he collapses into the armchair, loosens the knot in his necktie, takes a gold Dupont lighter from the top drawer of the desk, and lights a Montecristo while the woman fixes her hair, wipes the corners of her lips, and sucks down a line.

“You want?” she asks.

She’s got a young face, hardly marked by age, and the mascara dripping from her left eye gives her a certain air of negligence, abandon, desperation.

Mr. Machi thinks of his heart problems and the little blue pill he took less than an hour ago, which guarantees his still-relentless organ a slow, even cavalier diminution.

“No, no,” he answers, with tobacco smoke in his mouth, then exhales, letting it mingle with that growing triangle of light shining through the window, drawing—the light and the smoke—figures in the air that no one else will bother looking at.

The young woman with the blond hair sniffs—once, twice, three times—and curses, smug and sassy, at the coke, her fate, the triangle of light foretelling another beautiful day—damn it—and the taste of Mr. Machi’s sperm in her mouth.

“I’m going, Luis,” she announces.

“Shut the door, I’ve got to stay a while longer. Tell Eduardo and Pereyra to make sure everyone shows up early tonight, okay? Remember, the Mexicans are coming . . .”

“Relax, I’ve got them under control. We’ll see each other tonight, babe,” the young woman says, taking leave of Mr. Machi with a kiss on the neck. He lets her kiss him and goes on amusing himself with the smoke from his Montecristo, as though she no longer existed—as though, his desires sated, the girl with the blond hair and the golden nose were nothing more than an irritation. Then,

when she turns and heads for the door, hips shifting in her skirt, he takes a look at her ass.

Tomorrow I'm going to crack that wide open, he thinks.

Now alone in his office, he goes to the bathroom and looks at himself in the mirror.

In the mirror, Mr. Machi sees success.

And what is success for Mr. Machi?

He smiles and thinks: Success is me.

Success is a blond bimbo sucking your cock, Luisito, he thinks, smiling into the mirror—success is the taste of a Montecristo. Success is that little blue pill and ten mil in the bank.

He relights the cigar waiting for him in the ashtray on his desk and dials a number on the antique phone. The triangle of light has now taken over the office, leaving no doubt that morning is here.

“Hello,” the woman's voice responds, sluggish and bewildered, laying extra stress on the *lo*.

“Hey, I just finished up, I'll be heading back in a bit.”

“You just finished up?” the harridan asks. “How nice of you to call. Did you at least wash up first?”

“Mirta, please, don't break my balls. Get something going for breakfast, I'll be home in an hour, give or take,” Mr. Machi says, more bored than angry.

“Fine, I'll tell Gladis to make something, if you like.” The malice in her words seems to make her feisty. “Ah, no, I'll have to tell Herminia . . .”

“Again with this, Mirta,” Mr. Machi says. He takes

another drag from his Montecristo and wonders why, since he's still feeling the effects of the little pill, he didn't just tell the girl with the blond hair and the green skirt to stick around so he could give it to her in the ass.

"To what do I owe the honor of your presence at breakfast, if I may be so bold as to ask?" With each word, his wife's voice, Mirta's voice, emerges further from its stupor, her mounting rage evident in her *S*'s, like the hissing of a serpent.

"It's my house, isn't it?" says Mr. Machi, running out of patience. "You're my wife, yeah? So hop to it, whip me up something decent for breakfast . . . I'll be there in an hour, give or take."

He hangs up.

Ball-breaker, he thinks.

He decides, despite the little blue pill and his heart problems, he'll do another rail before he goes.

2 “GOOD MORNING, SIR, everything in order?” says the gorilla with the shaved head—eyes attentive, arms crossed behind his back, no expression on his vacant face—who watches over the garage door in the basement of El Imperio.

“What’s up,” Mr. Machi responds with a clenched jaw. He snaps his fingers and stretches out his hand.

“Keys,” he says.

“Keys,” he repeats, not giving time to react.

The gorilla with the shaved head moves quickly, with an agility startling for his big, heavy body.

“Sir,” he says with no look on his face, dropping the BMW keys into the outstretched hand of Mr. Machi, who goes on walking without even thinking of the word *thanks*.

“Wait for me to leave, then wait a little longer, and after that, you can get some shut-eye, fat-ass,” Mr. Machi says, looking elsewhere and still not slowing his step.

The BMW beeps twice. He gets in. The feel of the seat is luxurious. He chose the leather himself.

It's like stroking a young girl's ass, Mr. Machi thinks.

He pulls off his tie, stuffs it in his suit pocket, and tilts the rearview mirror to look at himself. He makes a face. It would have been a smile if not for the coke. He inspects his eyes, his teeth, his gums, and finally his nostrils, looking for residue. There isn't any. He readjusts the mirror and thinks once more about success.

This car is success, Luisito, that grade-A coke, buddy, your collection of Italian silk ties, just think, even that ball-breaker Mirta is success.

He looks for his Versace sunglasses in the glove compartment and puts them on. Now, now he's ready. He twists the key in the ignition and the BMW motor turns over, mute and powerful. No sooner have the garage doors closed behind the taillights of the black car turning the wrong way down Balcarce to Belgrano than the gorilla with the shaved head spits on the floor, loosens his tie, and shakes his head, uttering a verdict: "Cocksucking son of a bitch."



3 A BLACK BOLT OF LIGHTNING shoots across General Paz at seven in the morning, leaving looks of astonishment and envy in its wake. Mr. Machi feels them like a caress, those looks of envy at his fortune striking the body of the BMW that seems to glide over the asphalt until it reaches the Acceso Norte headed toward the Panamericana Highway. His cell phone starts ringing while the turnoff opens up, then disappears behind him as the black bolt of lightning veers onto the Panamericana.

“Machi,” he answers.

“Hey, Pa, sorry to bother you right now but I need to know if this fucking book fell out of my backpack in your car the other day, I need it for class, and . . .”

Mr. Machi, who’s already stopped listening, drops the phone in the passenger seat to turn on his hands-free and looks around for his daughter’s book. When he puts in the earpiece, she’s still explaining how urgent it is that he find it.

“ . . . I’ve got a midterm this week and it turns out . . .”

A snatch of something orange and angular peeks over the passenger seat next to the door. Mr. Machi, without slowing down or taking his left hand off the wheel, lunges over and grabs it. It's the book: *The Order of Things*.

"It's here, Luciana," Mr. Machi says, interrupting his daughter's monologue. "Come by the house and grab it when you feel like it. Or by El Imperio. I'm gonna hang up now, I'm driving, babe."

"Okay, Pa, I'll come by tonight with Fe then. We'll see you at like nine. Love you," the girl says, but Mr. Machi doesn't hear her. He hangs up after the word *babe* to give his full concentration to the pleasure of piloting the black bolt of lightning gliding over the asphalt of the Panamericana.

He doesn't want to think about his kids, not about Luciana and especially not about Alan. And he doesn't need to wonder what success is, because he can feel it in the potent purr of the accelerator beneath his right foot, in the cushioned upholstery, in the power steering, in the sunlight and the stares of astonishment and envy reflecting off the BMW's gloss finish.

Less than half a mile past the second tollbooth, Mr. Machi feels the wheel jerk and the car, which was gliding over the pavement like a black bolt of lightning, lurches left.

I popped a tire, he thinks.

Right front, he thinks.

He straightens the BMW with almost professional finesse and pulls it onto the shoulder.

“Shit,” Mr. Machi exclaims.

Shit.

Shit.

It must be twenty, twenty-five years since I’ve blown a tire, he thinks. This is what I get for dropping two hundred Gs on a car?

Then, without cutting the engine, he leans his head on the upholstery he selected himself and shuts his eyes for a second. He needs to muster his patience and fortitude before getting out of the car. Above all, he must be ready to put up with the looks of scorn born of resentment on the faces of the passersby in their ramshackle Dunas, Peugeot 504s, and Renault 19s—cars that cost what he spends on a whore or on a lunch out—as they pass the BMW stranded on the roadside, the same BMW they saw shoot past minutes before like a black bolt of lightning. He knows all those poor bastards will be over the moon to see him stranded there with a blown tire.

A tiny victory for their minuscule lives, he thinks.

And so, as the first batch of Dunas, Peugeot 504s, and Renault 19s passes, before getting out to make sure he’s got a flat, he opens his daughter’s book and reads:

“This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought.”

What?

He shakes his head. He reads a little more and figures out what he's reading is a ludicrous inventory, a stupid list a five-year-old kid could have made up.

This is what I pay tuition for? he thinks. So she can read this horseshit? It'd be one thing if she studied law or engineering, but no . . .

So this is who Luciana reveres? Guys like this dick-head who gets off on a list a five-year-old kid could have made up, these are the people his daughter reads with devotion in a department that hits him up for \$450 every month? These are her philosophers, her sociologists, her thinkers? This is the culture she gets from those professors while he foots the bill for their salaries? What the fuck are they good for, anyway? Could they have built up an empire from nothing, the way he did? And if their kids get the notion to go off to college, could they cough up \$450 a month? Eh? Could they?

His hand tenses around the book.

"This book first arose out of a passage in Borges," he reads again.

Borges wrote that? So that makes him Argentina's greatest writer? Mr. Machi congratulates himself for never bothering to read him. Then he reads on, just to piss himself off more.

"But what is it impossible to think, and what kind of impossibility are we faced with here?" he reads.

Mr. Machi opens the window in indignation and throws the book with the orange cover into the middle of the Panamericana. Euphoric, he watches how one, two, three cars pass by before he steps out of the BMW with the word *losers* trembling in his mouth.