
Andreu MARTIN

Just When We'd

Started Having Fun

Translated from Spanish by

Deborah BONNER

Juliocarlos lines up the three iridescent rings in "Rubik's Magic"

and drops it down on the floor next to the armchair. He's bored with it, just as he got bored with Rubik's last game, the famous cube, which he'd managed to put together in less than a minute. He sighs and looks around, wondering what to do next. The room is full of games he's tired of playing.

He strikes millions on the pinball machine without the slightest effort. He's sick of killing martians, of being Popeye and rescuing Olive Oil from the arms of Brutus, of chasing packmen and getting Indiana Jones out of the Temple of Doom with the ruby of victory. On the computer, the flight simulator has turned him into an expert pilot; he finds and steals the Hobbits' treasure with the greatest of ease, he always ends up running the world in war games, and at chess he has managed to overcome the most difficult of the IBM levels with a move as elementary as it is disheartening.

With his pocket games he has taken thousands of cakes out of the oven after Mickey Mouse's girlfriend baked them, and he has caught crowds of people who threw themselves out of

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windows from blazing buildings into the firemen's jumping sheet. He has built words playing anagrams and discovered unexpected palindromes. He has added up letters, figured out equations and cheated, rebuilt scrambled sentences, and found the hidden Swedish names in creepy gigantic alphabet grids. He has come up with three answers to riddles that are only supposed to have one, he has deciphered impossible rebuses and found the seven differences between a Dali painting and an almost identical reproduction. He has fit thousands upon thousands of pieces into hundreds upon hundreds of puzzles, he has swayed his hands until they cramped trying to put tiny balls into tiny holes, or hook certain rings onto fake coral branches in toys filled with water. He's practiced his aim with darts, peashooters, slingshots, throwing cards into a hat and tossing rings onto the living room chandelier. He wins easily at all the different varieties of Foxes and Geese. He has tried out the seventy-two versions of solitaire with a poker deck. He's an expert at cup-and-ball toys, pool, tiddly-winks, knucklebones, marbles, boccie, hopscotch, leapfrog, horseshoes, mumblety-peg and quoits. He knows how to make sailor's knots, card houses, bridges and ships out of toothpicks, plastic and wood scale models; he can do Spanish paper-folding, Japanese origami, and many magic tricks. He has driven model racing cars and remote control airplanes; he has built huge miniature train sets. He has experimented with Super 8 and video. He has masturbated watching photographs and movies and picturing fantasies. He has tried getting drunk on wine, scotch, green chartreuse, vodka, gin, beer and marc de champagne. He has smoked light cigarettes, black cigarettes, hashish, marihuana, opium, Havana and Tuscan cigars, and a pipe.

He lights a cigarette. He rubs his face with his hand. He yawns. He looks at his watch. Seven past seven. Still. From the depths of the armchair that devours him, the room alternately appears to be too big or claustrophobic, suddenly overwhelming with resources and then completely lacking in interest.

On the TV set, where a detective advances slowly towards the edge of the twentieth floor, are the leftovers of yesterday's

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pizza. The beer that spilled on the Turkish rug, the bottle of champagne that he opened and then didn't feel like drinking, the photographs from the album scattered across the floor among the videotapes. And the records. And the headphones, plugged into the stereo, above the couch, probably playing comforting music that Juliocarlos will never hear from where he is. Newspapers, magazines, Sunday supplements, comic books, two boring books that he's supposed to read. If he waits a little longer, they'll no longer be fashionable and he won't have to bother reading them. At the other end of the room, too far away, beyond his reach, a cigarette has been smouldering for a while. Juliocarlos imagines that a spark falls; the house could set on fire because of an oversight like that. Flames melt all the games, all the chips, all the circuits. He doesn't find it a stimulating image.

The phone rings.

Surprise. The phone. He raises an eyebrow, only one, lazy eyebrow; his hand comes unstuck from the forehead where it was resting, slowly, while the phone keeps on ringing, urgent and impolite, too anxious for the calm that permeates the room, exasperated and exasperating for the slow pace of he who must answer and is still coming up with a plan. One ring and another and yet another, adding up and annoying Juliocarlos, who takes advantage of his gesture to stretch and advances dragging his feet, numb. His hand flutters around the receiver, afraid to be suprised by a silence, picks it up just in time and the answer comes out as a yawn:

"Hellooo?"

The anxious whisper appears offensive, excessive, in Juliocarlos' brain, and spills out like some sticky substance all around the room and the entire house.

"Mr. Arteché? This is Ledesma. Listen, I swear it's all been an awful mistake..." Someone has dialed the wrong number. Yes, it is an awful human mistake, or maybe a mechanical one. Juliocarlos is not called Arteché and doesn't know any Ledesmas.

"Yes. It's a mistake," says Juliocarlos.

Click, the line goes dead. He stands there staring at the

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phone, repeating the words over and over in his mind, like an echo, automatically, the words blurted out by the man, *Mr. Arteche this is Ledesma listen I swear it's all been an awful mistake*. Juliocarlos sighs; he is intrigued, livelier than before, mildly interested in something that just passed him by, let down because now that fleeting, intriguing spark has slipped away from him forever. What a pity. What was it? Who knows.

The sound of the phone ringing fills the house again. Now it's merry, attractive. It rings again and again and again. Juliocarlos smiles enigmatically, expecting unexpected surprises.

"Hello?"

"Please, Mr. Arteche, listen, don't hang up!" It's the hysterical, sick, crazy voice again. Some asthmatic wheezing, a smoker whose lungs are full of nicotine, coughing in his rush to say every single thing before he's interrupted. "I swear, I'll pay up! It's all been an awful mistake! I didn't say I didn't mean to pay you! Please don't do anything, don't do anything! Give me a chance, just a couple of days to get the money together, Mr. Arteche, please, I beg you. I swear on my mother's grave that I'll pay you back."

Suddenly he stops short, realizing there's no answer, horrified at the possibility that Mr. Arteche has hung up the phone or felt offended by his verbal onslaught. His voice softens and pretends to slow down, with the caution of someone whispering in a church full of echoes:

"Mr. Arteche... can you hear me?"

Juliocarlos says:

"Yes."

Ledesma replies with aplomb, politely, talking like a real person, revealing no emotion:

"Mr. Arteche. I didn't tell Romero that I didn't mean to pay you. Gambling debts are debts of honor. All I said was that for the moment I didn't have the cash, and that you could give me two days to get it together and then I'd pay you, I swear on my mother's grave." Watch out, he's losing it again, fear is gripping his vocal chords and running through his entire body. Watch

out. A pause to swallow. Open mouth to gulp in air. Aplomb. Let's try again. "I know what they must have told you about me, Mr. Arteche. That I'm this and that. But if I've ever cheated anyone, Mr. Arteche, if I've ever cheated anyone it was because they were more crooked than I was. I know when I'm dealing with real people and when I'm not, and you're for real. I'm telling you that I'll pay up and you bet I will, Mr. Arteche. But the thing is, I need two days because I don't have the cash right now."

Ledesma finishes and runs up against another overwhelming silence. His voice trembles, his aplomb fails him, it's about to crumble.

"Mr. Arteche?"

"I'm listening," says Juliocarlos.

"Can I have those two days?" Humble, groveling, shrinking behind that desolate little voice.

"Why don't you come over now and we can talk about it?"

Now the silence is on the other end, piercing and descending in a spiral. Juliocarlos thinks that Ledesma thinks that he's being set up.

"Maybe," he improvises, "we could forget about it if you did a little job for me. I need someone like you." Juliocarlos doesn't want to ask *Well, what do you say?*. Men like Arteche don't ask. They give orders. "So come and see me. Write down my address."

"I know where you live, Mr. Arteche."

"We're going to meet somewhere else. Write it down."

He dictates his address and Ledesma writes it down, not daring to object until he's finished.

"But, Mr. Arteche, all I need is two days. I think I'd actually rather have two days..."

"What time is it? Hmm, ten past seven. I want to see you at this address at nine o'clock."

"But Mr. Arteche..."

"It will be better for both of us, Ledesma."

Juliocarlos hangs up the phone, excited, thrilled. If he noticed, he'd see his hand was trembling ever so slightly on the phone. A smile is pulling at his lips. His gaze wanders off,

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studying a future full of amusing surprises. He imagines. He plans. He weighs possibilities. He only has two hours.

He picks up the phone. He dials a number. He says:

"Lupe." Lupe stretches. She purrs. "Hello. It's Juliocarlos. What are you up to?" "Nothing. I'm here." "Something really weird just happened to me. Get this: A guy dials the wrong number and he's in real trouble. Owes money from gambling. He was terrified, this guy, asking me for two more days. I told him to come to my house, how do you like that?" Lupe's surprised. "You really are something. To your house?" "You got it. He's going to be here at nine." "You really are something." Lupe giggles mischievously. "It might be fun. Why did you tell him to come?" "I don't know. Just to give him a hard time. To put on a good show. What do you think? Could be fun, huh? Why don't you come? You put on some really hot outfit and come on over and we'll make him do things. Come on, baby, I know you love to act. You seduce him for me and I'll videotape it. What do you say? A porn number. Yeah. What do you say?"

"Okay."

2

The downstairs buzzer rings. Giggling mischievously and looking at her little bunny rabbit face in the mirror, Lupe tightens the sash on her robe, shows some cleavage so he can see that she isn't wearing a bra, that her breasts are naturally firm, and answers over the intercom while Juliocarlos runs to hide behind the curtains in the hall, behind the plants, behind the video camera through which he intends to be the surreptitious observer.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Arteche?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Ledesma. I'm Ledesma. Is Mr. Arteche in?"

"Come on up."

She presses the button and buzzes him in. Lupe smells her hands, sniffing perfume to get drunk on herself. As nervous as an actress on opening night, she goes back to the mirror, draws

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her tongue across her lightly contoured lips, rolls her eyes and flutters her eyelashes seductively, kisses the air, kisses her reflection and almost feels the beginning of a turn-on. What will Ledesma be like. Why not with him. Videotaped, with Juliocarlos spying on them. Why not.

The elevator arrives. "Come in." Lupe opens the door, showing herself in all her splendor to the only survivor of a long battle. A man with defeated shoulders, an expression softened by blows, the eyes of a friend by obligation, a weak smile entrusting his soul to his superiors, the insecure shyness of are you sure it's alright, nodding in appreciation of the woman's beauty because it's polite to show appreciation towards one's superior's belongings. Wow, what a knockout, if I may say so, Mr. Arteche, I congratulate you for your good taste.

"Mr. Arteche?"

"He isn't here right now. But please come in."

"Well, if he isn't in..." If Mr. Arteche isn't there, Ledesma can't go in, because what would Mr. Arteche think if he arrived and found the two of them alone, she without a bra, because she isn't wearing a bra, she who is so beautiful.

"It doesn't matter," Lupe scolds him for his hesitation, who does he thinks he is. "Come in."

Ledesma advances two tiny steps, enough for her to shut the door behind him and trap him in the apartment; he can no longer run away. "But you see, I..." Triumphant, Lupe turns her back to him and walks away to show the man how she can wiggle her fine ass, propped up above those long legs, sculpted by the silk robe.

"Come in," she insists. She loses her patience. "Come in!"

Ledesma follows her trying not to step out of the way, afraid that he'll be swallowed by quicksand or strangled by live lianas. He follows her with an eye fixed on each buttock, his pupils dancing to the rhythm of the woman's stride. Some people have all the luck. Quite a place this Arteche has. Ledesma knew his other place, the dingy little front, to make people believe he was a cheap little mobster. Who would have known that Arteche lived in a house like that. With a woman like that. He sure kept it to himself, the little rascal. And how he must trust you

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if he's willing to show you his domain. You must be one of the chosen few who have entered this temple, Ledesma. That's a privilege.

They reach a hall facing a courtyard. Plants and wicker armchairs. A bottle of scotch on the round table. An upholstered lawn swing for two. The backdrop is a curtain, behind the lush mangroves. That's where the videotape records the beginning of the comedy scene. The actors come on stage. Marilyn as radiant as a sun, at her best, and the silly clown tripping over his big shoes and his fake nose. The audience laughs at the very sight of him. He doesn't even have to say or do a thing.

Lupe is holding two glasses with ice, and she hands them to the clown stretching out her arms in a gesture that makes her look as though she were surrendering her virginity.

"Pour me a scotch, and one for yourself, too."

Ledesma thinks she's a whore. First class, but a whore. How much does she charge? He pours the scotch. Chivas Regal. Ledesma had always thought that Chivas was a kind of brandy. Now he should say something but nothing comes to mind. "Mr. Arteché told me to come."

"Come. Sit over here."

She points to the other half of the seat in the swing. Ledesma has no intention whatsoever of sitting there. No way. Then Mr. Arteché walks in and sees them, and then what. Ledesma feels himself blushing, his face and eyes are burning and he figures he must need a drink.

"Well, you see. You would never think that... If Mr. Arteché isn't home. I'd better leave. But the funny thing is, you would never drink that he..."

"Drink," she says, accusingly.

"Drink?"

"You said drink," she laughs. "You must be thirsty. Come on, go ahead." He drinks. "Come, sit over here." She does Lord knows what and her long leg emerges from under the silk, an endless thigh that ventures beyond where the panties should begin but they are nowhere to be seen. "You're afraid."

"No." He means that he isn't going to sit down. It seems

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as though he was saying he wasn't afraid.

"So you're Ledesma."

"Yes."

"Arteche has told me a lot about you." Whisper: "Come."

Ledesma drinks. Ledesma goes. He's following orders. I only went because she asked me to. Zoom into the swing. He tries to sit as far away as he can from the naked, naked thigh, that arm reaching out across the backrest, surrounding the nape of its victim's neck. He tries not to see the opening in the silk robe. The firm breast. The swollen nipple. He tries not to see her shameless smile, her inviting glance.

He tries not to hear what she says.

"Arteche is a son of a bitch. Believe me, I know what you're going through."

The microphone is recording perfectly. Even if they only whisper.

"Mr. Arteche..." Wait. Don't go too fast. Swallow. Now. Keep your cool.

"Arteche is a son of a bitch," she repeats. What a sly minx. "I know he's screwing you over. He's threatened you. Tell me. He's threatened you." She talks like that, and you don't know whether she's asking you a question or what. "You or your family."

"Well, I do owe him some money."

"How much."

"Some. Nothing, really. Nothing. Really."

"How much."

"Nothing, really. Six..." Calm down, don't get flustered.

"Over six hundred thousand pesetas. A bad streak. I told him that if he gave me two days..."

"Six thousand dollars..." Lupe converts snobbishly. "He won't."

"Yeah. He told me..."

"He's a son of a bitch. What did he tell you he'd do if you didn't pay."

"He hasn't. Told me. Anything."

"He's got me locked up in here." That's it, Lupe. Go on. Go on. "He told me that if I try to leave or run away he'll kill

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my family. My father, my mother. He broke my newborn baby's arm to prove that he wasn't kidding." Holy shit, Lupe. What an imagination.

Ledesma drinks up. The ice cubes hit his lip. Yes. Arteche's capable of that. Of that and much more. He sure does recognize this Arteche. Arteche never threatens you when you're gambling. And he's never been known to act, either. But people talk, there are rumors. They're afraid of him. Did you hear about the guy who cheated? Do you know about the guys who held up the game at San Pablo? Ledesma drinks, convinced that Arteche is a son of a bitch if there ever was one.

The girl's hand strokes the nape of his neck. It plays with his hair and makes his stomach flutter. If he looks out of the corner of his eye, like this, without moving his head, he can see the opening in the robe, the breast, the nipple. He doesn't have to turn his head to see the thigh either, right there, within his hand's reach.

"I'm so lonely," she says.

She's asking for it.

"Don't you worry about Arteche," she insists. "He won't be back for a while. He had no intention of seeing you. He forgot about you the minute he hung up the phone." The hand caresses the neck, tickling, slipping chills down the man's spine. The girl is moving, sinuous as a snake, temptation closes in, the opening in the robe, the breast, the nipple, the thigh, the breath very near. "We were both... naked... when you called..."

Oh. He thinks. What a nuisance.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

Her skin smells good, emanates contagious heat. It's fire and Ledesma is kindling, and her breath against his blushing cheek is a breeze from hell, the beginning of a wild blaze that crumbles the foundations of the solid Ledesma building. Something explodes in the basement, a cataclysm under his pants, a fevered heat, a delirious fever. Ledesma may be delirious when he hears the girl speak, the volcanic breath whispering against his cheek.

"I was giving Arteche head when you called."

Good job, Lupe. Amazing. That's great. The look on

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Ledesma's face. This is one hell of a videotape. We're going to laugh ourselves silly.

"Oh. I'm. Sorry. I. Couldn't."

Ledesma may be delirious when he sees the long hand with white-polished nails hover over his fly and settle casually, noticing everything, noticing the cataclysm in the basement, acknowledging his desire. Meanwhile, she says:

"Why don't you help me screw Arteché over."

The hand settled there. Noticing everything. The palm surrounding the bulge, the fingers almost squeezing it. The opening in the robe right there out of the corner of his eye. The breast. The nipple. The fever. No panties. Dive in.

"What if we knock him off tomorrow. I know two guys who want him dead. They'd pay you well."

The bulge is swelling more and more, like never before, so the hand can fit around it better. The hand fits, measures the bulge, counts the beats that swell it, calculates its heat, checks its hardness. Ledesma thinks he'll have to do something before he makes a mess in his pants. Arteché could walk in and kill him. If Arteché walks in now, he'll kill him. They'll kill each other. The girl is leaning all her weight on him and creeping into his ear. Each syllable is a hot blast of breath.

"If you kill him, I'll be yours." Kill Arteché. The solution. So many people would thank him for it. "You could take me wherever you wanted." The hand is already massaging firmly. Why not get it over with once and for all? She's dying for it, this chick. You'll never come across a broad like this again, Ledesma. You'll end up in bed. The sooner you do it, the better. You can't stand it any longer. The hand is massaging and driving you crazy, blinding you. Did you hear that? "You'd be rich. Those guys would pay you a bundle. One million. Two. Save me. You'd be rich. Save me..."

It's dead easy. All he has to do is grab the girl's neck and turn his head a little to find the crater's breath, dry lips, moist tongue, a mouth full of echoes that send back and multiply his urge. It's dead easy. All he has to do is move his hand like this and it's inside the silk robe, over that breast like nothing you've ever seen, ever touched before. Ledesma, never, maybe you will

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never taste the likes of this again. But now there's no time to savor it, Ledesma. Now you're in a rush because the flames have eaten up the fuel and the fire is like a stampede of wild horses, an explosion that runs up Ledesma from South to North, turning him into a satyr, rapist, suicidal maniac, all of him a hand slipping down the belly towards her luxurious fur, no time to waste. You trust that she will open your fly and set you free like she's supposed to, while you look for moisture, just a routine check before moving on to bigger and better things because there's no time, there's no time. The swing starts swaying grotesquely as if the spring from a tasteless jack-in-the-box had gone off. The hand that won't open the fly is on the chest of a frantic Ledesma with popping eyes and drooling lips, snorting through his nose, whinnying while his trembling hands fondle, squeeze, pinch clumsily, looking for the luxurious fur that slips away. It slips away and breaks down the seductive gesture of the girl who objects, halts, evades, scolds, jumps, eludes, shouts.

"Stop it!"

"But, but, but!" howls the killer.

"It hurts," she hisses, she scolds him a little, she asks him to understand, she begs with her glance. "It hurts. He tortured me. He hurt me very, very much. Tomorrow... Tomorrow I'll be yours if you kill him. Tell me: you'll kill him. Tell me you will."

Background speech for a man who is doubled over as if he'd been beaten, paying half his attention to his premature pleasure, moist and untimely, a jet of cold water on the fire, the shame of wet pants, son of a bitch.

"Poor baby. We'll do it right tomorrow. Yeah. I promise." Sniffling with his head low, his eyes set on the tip of the robe's silk sash. Blushing for other reasons. Trembling because of something else. She wasn't right for you, Ledesma. You knew it all along. You should have stayed away. But that hand, that breast, that nipple, that thigh, that breath. Who cares. "You promise" " Yes. I promise."

"You know San Agustin. The beach."

Yes. Head low. Yes. Whatever you say. Defeated.

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Whatever you say, yes, I know where it is.

"Tomorrow at nine in the morning. That's where you'll meet the two guys I told you about. The two want to get rid of Arteché. They'll pay you big money. Real big. And then come and get me."

Yeah. Whatever. Big money. Yeah.

"Come on, have a bit of scotch."

The hand that leads him to the door. The distant whisper, very far, promising the impossible, tomorrow I'll be yours, tomorrow big money, I really mean it. Impossible. If it didn't happen today, it never will.

"You'll be there. Tell me you'll be there."

"Yes, I will."

Outrageous laughter when the door closes. Lupe rushing towards Juliocarlos who receives her with open arms and shouts with enthusiasm.

"You were terrific, Lupe, terrific! How on earth did you think of...?" Mischievous laughter. No words for it. No words. No words for it. "It was just plain terrific... I couldn't believe how you improvised, you were amazing... So, what are we going to do now?"

"The guy was feeling you up, huh? You should have seen him. Well, you will on the video, it's an amazing tape, an incredible document, a docudrama, as they call them now, just look at him go, the guy, look, look, look. My god, it's a comedy act. So, what should we do? How on earth did you come up with that San Agustín thing, the two guys who want to kill Arteché. Well, well, well. Did you make it all up or had you already thought of it before? How did you do it? Anyway, it was great, but what are we going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Should we just forget it or keep on going?"

"I don't know. Are you busy tomorrow?"

"No. Are you?"

"Nope."

"So?"

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3

Lucas and Bruno are instructors at a gym that Juliocarlos belonged to some time ago. They're young, gorgeous, tall, muscular, shameless, they have a sense of humor, they're capable of anything; when they go amuck they drive the women crazy. Juliocarlos called them one day when a bunch of girls who were friends of his asked him to bring some men to a party, and it was a big success. Since then they keep in touch for one thing or another and have a lot of friends in common. Juliocarlos and Lupe knew how to locate them. They met in a bar. Would they like to be in on a really exciting, unusual game? It's a deal. We're going to have a blast, look, this is the story, a little while ago this guy dialed the wrong number and got Juliocarlos.

If everything works out as planned, that man will go to the San Agustin beach to make a deal with the two guys who want to kill Arteche. The guys will promise him two million or so. Let's see what he says and does.

"Well, so what?"

"What do you mean so what."

"Yeah. When we've made the deal, what?"

"Improvise. Like Lupe did. Improvise."

"But don't push it too far."

"No, we won't get to serious business. Just get him all psyched up and then tell him it was a joke."

"And we pay him the six hundred thousand he owes and he'll even thank us in the end."

"But I don't know what to tell him..."

"You'll think of something. Use your imagination. I don't want to know. Surprise me. I'll be there, with a super directional mike; it will catch every word you say."

"But I don't know... do you know what to tell him?"

"I don't know..."

"You'll think something up."

4

In winter at nine in the morning the beach at San Agustin looks smaller and greyer than in summer. The tall rocks that

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rise up behind it seem taller and darker, and they cast more shade so people would never dream of sunning themselves there. The sand looks like brown dust and the sea is black, troubled and grumbling, breaking waves into countless white shards, crashing too loud. It's frozen and freezes the atmosphere all around it.

The videocamera catches the entire landscape faithfully, panning slowly, describing in fine detail. A seagull over there. Farther away, a wave that grows much larger than the rest, false alarm; it goes back to an average height when it's discovered.

The videocamera, concealed between pines and rocks, up on top of the hill to the right, looks for signs of life climbing the cliffs, lingering on the bloated sky and stumbling upon the train that just arrived, maybe this is finally it. The train pulls out and all that's left on camera is the image of the slanted roof, the only visible part of the station from up there. This finally was Ledesma's train. How could I have had any doubts. With a reward the likes of Lupe. How could I have had any doubts.

There he is, distressed, down the path, between the cliffs, covered by trees, down past the lot where hundreds of dusty cars park in the summer. He's alone. His hands are deep in the pockets of the corduroy jacket he was wearing yesterday. He stops. He looks. If he doesn't see Lucas and Bruno, he may not walk any further.

Lupe signals as planned and Lucas and Bruno walk out to the beach, onto the sand, to put on their show. Tall, handsome, swaggering, trendy, well groomed, clean in their movements, basically well-meaning, determined not to be too hard on Ledesma, only a little joke and that's it. Just to see what he'll do. Their feet mark the virgin sand with two rows of deep footsteps. They walk over to the water, as Juliocarlos suggested, just to look good in the picture.

"Look. He sees them. He's going down."

Ledesma walks down. His head sullen between his shoulders, he looks stronger, more compact, more resistant to erosion. Lupe wonders what it would have been like yesterday if she'd let him. Why didn't she? Juliocarlos wonders if he'll be able to pan across from Ledesma to Bruno and Lucas. He'd like

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Bruno and Lucas to say something, or cough, just to check the sound on the directional mike. For the moment, he only knows they're catching the wind's interference, but the beach is protected. Juliocarlos is sure that he'll record the softest of whispers. Down comes Ledesma. Bruno and Lucas have seen him, and face him head on, pointing to the water's edge; Ledesma reaches the sand and steps on it; his tracks make a new line that heads towards the end of the last one.

Bruno and Lucas haven't thought of anything brilliant. They were kidding around last night, but they didn't come up with any plot that seemed convincing. Now they see the guy and feel sorry for him. They try to picture him with Lupe and they can't.

Ledesma, on the other hand, has done a lot of thinking since last night.

"Ledesma?" Bruno asks, knowing that they're supposed to make the first move. Let's see what he says. The mike picks up the breathing of all three.

"That's me," the man replies, a little aggressively, just enough, looking at them sideways, mistrusting.

"We want you to knock off Arteche," says Lucas, rather clumsily.

"Why?"

"That's our business. We give you the money, you knock him off and that's the end of that."

"I want to know your names and how you know Arteche, or else there's no deal."

Ledesma has figured that he doesn't want any hanky-panky. Maybe Arteche's testing his loyalty. But these kids don't seem to fit in with Arteche, the way they dress and talk, their classy manners.

"Well, then, there's no deal, Ledesma," says Bruno.

"No deal." Ledesma's ready to leave.

"Wait," says Lucas. The fun can't be over so soon.

Ledesma looks at him. Lucas plays the good boy, who understand and wants to negotiate. He improvises: "You've got to understand. We can't tell you about it. The less you know, the better. It's a drug deal."

Drugs. Yeah, that makes sense. These kids' looks and the new aspirations of Arteché, who wants to make it big, rumor has it, and who wants to strike a deal with the boss, Cañada... Maybe he's in it deeper than it seemed, judging by the house Ledesma saw yesterday.

"Who are you working for?" If he asks them point blank, they won't answer. He has to make them believe he's well-informed. Ledesma has been thinking all night long.

"Are you working for Cañada?" he blurts out astutely.

The two boys look at each other. They seem to be saying how did he know. Yes. They're working for Cañada.

"How did you know?" the blonde boy smiles, taken aback.

"Isn't Cañada partner of Arteché's?" Ledesma asks.

"Arteché hasn't been minding his own business," Bruno improvises, pretending to lose his patience, "and Cañada doesn't like busybodies."

It all makes sense. Yeah. What they're saying is true. Arteché wants to break into a market that's someone else's turf. Ledesma had heard about that. Now it turns out that Cañada's a big fish and he's not about to let a little Arteché into his pond.

The harmless man (who's been thinking all night) purses his lips, turns into sheer rage. His right hand darts out of his pocket, the blade of a shining knife jumps up in the confusion of a fast movement and seeks out Bruno's throat, cutting it open in a single blow. Lucas shrieks while up there the camera hasn't caught a thing. Meanwhile, the hand, knowing that only its speed and precision will make it win, thrusts into Lucas' belly, he keeps on shrieking, changes tone and drop to his knees. Bruno uselessly tries to stop the intermittent jet of blood flowing from his neck, from his own neck; the knife rips upward cruelly, opening a hole big enough for Ledesma's hand and he didn't want to stain his clothes; the camera freezes.

Juliocarlos bursts out laughing for a second, is then paralyzed by stupor, and finally overcome by frustration. What a pity, it all got messed up. Messed up when Lucas falls down flat, feeling his beating intestines on his fingertips, and Ledesma gives him a death blow, neatly piercing the nape of his neck. Messed up when he also kills Bruno, putting his horrible gurgle

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to an end. Messed up when Ledesma runs off proudly, convinced that he has gained Arteche's confidence. Arteche will be grateful, Ledesma has got rid of two dangerous enemies, and he may want to know that the slut he keeps at home would also like to see him dead.

"You leave that bitch to me," Ledesma imagines saying, "Leave that cockteaser to me, and I'll know how to put her in her place."

Isn't this favor worth the six hundred thousand he owes?

He runs uphill, panting, Ledesma, to the top, the station, safety, the negotiation with Arteche, whom he will no longer have to treat like his lord and master, he thinks; now they're practically buddies.

Juliocarlos and Lupe run towards the Volkswagen Passat waiting between the pine trees. It's all on tape. It's fantastic, it's amazing, it's terrifying, did you see that. How could they have botched it up so badly. They get into the car.

"Let's get out of here," Lupe whimpers hysterically.

"Calm down, calm down," says Juliocarlos, nodding in annoyance. "Damn, I can't believe it all got messed up at the last minute, it was going so well. It'll be okay. After all, that guy went and killed them. We barely know Lucas and Bruno. Nobody will make the connection. We don't know a thing. And we don't know Ledesma from Adam, either. Don't you worry, he'll never find you."

"But he will find *you*," says Lupe in a shrill voice. "He'll go to your house."

"He'll ask for Mr. Arteche. Ledesma has never seen me. I'll change the furniture around. Nobody will believe he was ever there."

The Volkswagen Passat rushes down a road that crosses the one where Ledesma's running.

"Kill him," says Lupe with a locked jaw, loading up animal rage in each syllable, in every letter.

There goes Ledesma, uphill. He runs faster, fearing that they may have witnessed the crime.

If the police stopped him, since he's got blood stains all over him, since he's a poor devil, cannon fodder, born to be the

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scapegoat, he would soon be knocking at Juliocarlos' door.

"Mr. Arteche?" "No. *You must have the wrong address.*

What's up?"

"Kill him," Lupe repeats fiercely. "Run him over. He's a killer, he'll screw you over, he can blackmail you."

If they don't catch him, Juliocarlos will get a phone call.

"Mr. Arteche?" "Sorry, *wrong number.*" "I have to talk to you." "Wrong number. *Wrong number.*" Or... what would Ledesma tell Mr. Arteche if he could talk to him? "I saved your life, Mr. Arteche." And what would Arteche reply?

"You'll have the cops after you," perverse litany, apology of a crime, crescendo drawing into murder, "he's a killer, kill him, kill him, kill him."

"No," says Juliocarlos.

The Volkswagen drives by. In the rear view mirror, Juliocarlos sees Ledesma running, exhausted, and thinks that they'll meet again. He hopes they do.

TWO KILLINGS AND ONE SUICIDE ON THE SAN AGUSTIN BEACH

Girona : *The bodies of two men, whose identities have not yet been revealed by the police, but who presumably belong to well-to-do families, were found with knife wounds on the beach of San Agustin. The weapon that was found nearby had the fingerprints of Mariano Ledesma Lopez, whose body was discovered at a distance, on the train tracks, where he apparently committed suicide.*