

5 This is the situation: B and his father are going on vacation to Acapulco. They are planning to leave very early, at six in the morning. B spends the night at his father's house. He doesn't dream, or, if he does, he forgets his dreams as soon as he opens his eyes. He hears his father in the bathroom. He looks out the window; it is still dark. He gets dressed without switching on the light. When he comes out of his room, his father is sitting at the table, reading the sports section from the day before, and
10 breakfast is ready. Coffee and huevos rancheros. B says hello to his father and goes into the bathroom.

His father's car is a 1970 Ford Mustang. At six-thirty, they get into the car and head out of the city. The city is Mexico City, and the year in which B and his father leave Mexico City for a short vacation is 1975.

15 Over all, the trip goes smoothly. Driving out of the city, both father and son feel cold, but as they leave the high valley behind and descend into the state of Guerrero the temperature climbs and they have to take off their sweaters and roll down the windows. B, who is inclined to melancholy (or so he likes to think), is at first completely absorbed in contemplating the landscape, but after a few hours the
20 mountains and forests become monotonous and he starts reading a book instead.

Before they get to Acapulco, B's father pulls up in front of a roadside café. The café serves iguana. Shall we try it? he suggests. The iguanas are alive and they hardly move when B's father goes over to look at them. B leans against the mudguard of the Mustang, watching him. Without waiting for an answer, B's father orders a portion
25 of iguana for himself and one for his son. Only then does B move away from the car. He approaches the open-air eating area — four tables under a canvas awning that is swaying slightly in the breeze — and sits down at the table farthest from the highway. B's father orders two beers. Father and son have unbuttoned their shirts and rolled up their sleeves. Both are wearing light-colored shirts. The waiter, by
30 contrast, is wearing a black long-sleeved shirt and doesn't seem bothered by the heat.

Going to Acapulco? the waiter asks. B's father nods. They are the only customers at the café. Cars whiz past on the bright highway. B's father gets up and goes out the back. For a moment, B thinks his father is going to the bathroom, but then he realizes that he has gone to the kitchen to see how they cook the iguanas. The waiter follows
35 him without a word. B hears them talking. First his father, then the man's voice, and finally the voice of a woman B can't see. B's forehead is beaded with sweat. His

glasses are misted and dirty. He takes them off and cleans them with his shirttail. When he puts them back on, he sees his father watching him from the kitchen. He can see only his father's face and part of his shoulder; the rest is hidden behind a red curtain with black dots, and B has the fleeting impression that this curtain separates not only the kitchen from the eating area but also one time from another.

Then B looks away and his gaze falls on the book lying on the table. It is a book of poetry, an anthology of French Surrealist poets, translated into Spanish by the Argentinean Surrealist Aldo Pellegrini. B has been reading this book for two days. He likes it. He likes the photos of the poets. The photo of Unik, the one of Desnos, the photos of Artaud and Crevel. The book is thick and covered with transparent plastic. It was covered not by B (who never covers his books) but by a particularly fastidious friend. B opens the book at random and comes face to face with Gui Rosey — the photo of Gui Rosey and his poems — and when he looks up again his father's head has disappeared.

The heat is stifling. B would be more than happy to go back to Mexico City, but he isn't going back, at least not yet; he knows that. Soon, his father is sitting next to him and they are both eating iguana with chili sauce and drinking more beer. The waiter in the black shirt has turned on a transistor radio and now some vaguely tropical music is blending with the noises of the jungle and the noise of the cars passing on the highway. The iguana tastes like chicken. It's tougher than chicken, B says, not entirely convinced. It's tasty, his father says, and orders another portion. They have cinnamon coffee. The man in the black shirt serves the iguana, but the woman from the kitchen brings out the coffee. She is young, almost as young as B; she is wearing white shorts and a yellow blouse with white flowers printed on it, flowers B doesn't recognize, perhaps because they don't exist. As they drink their coffee, B feels nauseous, but he doesn't say anything. He smokes and looks at the canvas awning, which is barely moving, as if weighed down by a narrow puddle of rainwater. But it can't be that, B thinks. What are you looking at? his father asks. The awning, B says. It's like a vein. But he doesn't say the bit about the vein; he only thinks it.

They arrive in Acapulco as night is falling. For a while, they drive up and down the avenues by the sea with the windows wide open and the breeze ruffling their hair. They stop at a bar and go in for a drink. This time, B's father orders tequila. B thinks for a moment. Then he orders tequila, too. The bar is modern and has air-conditioning. B's father talks with the waiter and asks him about hotels near the beach. By the time they get back to the Mustang, a few stars are visible, and for the first time that day B's father looks tired. Even so, they visit a couple of hotels, which for one reason or another are found unsatisfactory, before finding one that will do. The hotel is called La Brisa; it's small, a stone's throw from the beach, and has a swimming pool. B's father likes it. So does B. It's the off-season, so the hotel is almost

empty and the prices are reasonable. The room they are given has two twin beds and a small bathroom with a shower. The only window looks onto the hotel's terrace, where the swimming pool is. B's father would have preferred a sea view. The air-conditioning, they soon discover, is out of order. But the room is fairly cool, so they
5 don't complain. They make themselves at home: each opens up his suitcase and puts his clothes in the wardrobe. B puts his books on the bedside table. They change their shirts. B's father takes a cold shower while B just washes his face, and when they are ready they go out to dinner.

The reception desk is manned by a short guy with teeth like a rabbit's. He's young
10 and seems friendly. He recommends a restaurant near the hotel. B's father asks if there's somewhere lively nearby. B understands what his father means. The receptionist doesn't. A place with a bit of action, B's father says. A place where you can find girls, B says. Ah, the receptionist says. For a moment, B and his father stand there, without speaking. The receptionist crouches down, disappearing behind the
15 counter, and reappears with a card, which he holds out. B's father looks at the card, asks if the establishment is reliable, then extracts a bill from his wallet, which the receptionist catches on the fly.

But after dinner they go straight back to the hotel.

The next day, B wakes up very early. As quietly as possible, he takes a shower,
20 brushes his teeth, puts on his bathing suit, and leaves the room. The hotel is on a street that runs straight down to the beach, which is empty except for a boy renting out surfboards. B asks him how much it costs for an hour. The boy quotes a price that sounds reasonable, so B rents a board and pushes off into the sea. Out a ways is a little island, toward which he steers the board. At first, he has some trouble, but soon he
25 gets the hang of it. At this time of day, the sea is crystal clear, and B thinks he can see red fish under the board, about a foot and a half long, swimming toward the beach as he paddles toward the island.

It takes exactly fifteen minutes for him to get from the beach to the island. B doesn't know this, because he isn't wearing a watch, and for him time slows down. The
30 crossing seems to last an eternity. At the last minute, waves rear unexpectedly, impeding his approach. The sand on the island is noticeably different from that of the beach by the hotel; back there it was a golden, tawny color, perhaps because of the time of day (though B doesn't think so), while here it is a dazzling white, so bright it hurts his eyes to look at it.

B stops paddling and just sits there, at the mercy of the waves, which begin to carry
35 him slowly away from the island. By the time he finally reacts, he has drifted halfway back. B decides to turn around. The return is calm and uneventful. When he gets to

the beach, the boy who rents out the boards comes up and asks if he had a problem. Not at all, B says. An hour later, B returns to the hotel without having had breakfast and finds his father sitting in the dining room with a cup of coffee and a plate in front of him on which are scattered the remains of toast and eggs.

- 5 The following hours are hazy. They drive around aimlessly, watching people from the car. Sometimes they get out to have a cold drink or an ice cream. In the afternoon, on the beach, while his father is stretched out asleep in a deck chair, B rereads Gui Rosey's poems and the brief story of his life or his death:

10 One day, a group of Surrealists arrives in the South of France, from Paris. The north and the west of the country are occupied by the Germans. The south is under the control of Pétain. They try to get visas to go to the United States. Day after day, the U.S. consulate delays its decision. Among the members of the group are Breton, Tzara, and Péret, but there are also less famous figures. Gui Rosey is one of them. In the photo, he has the look of a minor poet, B thinks. He is ugly; he is impeccably
15 dressed; he looks like an unimportant civil servant or a bank teller. Up to this point, a few disagreements, but nothing out of the ordinary, B thinks. The Surrealists gather every afternoon at a café by the port. They make plans and chat; Rosey is always there. But one afternoon he fails to appear. At first, he isn't missed. He is a minor poet and no one pays much attention to minor poets. After a few days, however, the
20 others start to worry. At the pension where he is staying, no one knows what has happened; his suitcases and books are there, undisturbed, so he clearly hasn't tried to leave without paying (as guests at pensions on the Côte d'Azur are prone to do). His friends try to find him. They visit all the hospitals and police stations in the area. No one can tell them anything. One morning, the visas arrive. Most of the group boards
25 a ship and sets off for the United States. Those who remain, who will never get visas, soon forget about Rosey and his disappearance; people are disappearing all the time, in large numbers, and they have to look out for themselves.

That night, after dinner at the hotel, B's father suggests they go and find a bit of
30 action. B looks at his father. He is blond (B is dark), his eyes are gray, and he is still in good shape. He looks happy and ready to have a good time. What sort of action? asks B, who knows perfectly well what his father is referring to. The usual kind, B's father says. Drinking and women. For a while, B says nothing, as if he were pondering a reply. His father looks at him. The look might seem inquisitive, but in fact it is only affectionate. Finally, B says he's not in the mood for sex. It's not just about getting
35 laid, his father says. We'll go and see, have a few drinks, and enjoy ourselves with some friends. What friends? B says. We don't know anyone here. You always make friends when you're out for a ride. The expression makes B think of horses. When he was seven, his father bought him a horse. Where did my horse come from? B asks now. This takes his father by surprise. Horse? he asks. The one you bought me when

I was a kid, B says, in Chile. Ah, Hullabaloo, his father says, smiling. He was from the island of Chiloé, he says, then after a moment's reflection he starts talking about brothels again. The way he talks about them, they could be dance halls, B thinks. Then both of them fall silent.

5 That night they don't go anywhere.

While his father is sleeping, B goes out to the terrace to read by the swimming pool. The terrace is empty except for him. From his table, B can see part of the reception area, where the receptionist from the night before is standing at the counter reading something or doing the accounts. B reads the French Surrealists; he reads Gui Rosey.
10 To tell the truth, Gui Rosey doesn't interest him much. He is far more interested in Desnos and Éluard, and yet he always ends up coming back to Rosey's poems and looking at his photo, a studio portrait, in which he has the air of a solitary, wretched soul, with large, glassy eyes and a dark tie that seems to be strangling him.

He must have committed suicide, B thinks. He knew he was never going to get a visa,
15 so he decided to end it there and then. B imagines or tries to imagine a town on the Mediterranean coast of France. He has been all over Latin America, or almost, but he still hasn't set foot in Europe. So his image of a Mediterranean town is derived from his image of Acapulco. Heat; a small, cheap hotel; beaches of golden sand and beaches of white sand. And the distant sound of music. B doesn't realize that there is a crucial
20 element missing from the soundtrack of this scene: the clanging rigging of the small boats that throng the ports of all the towns on the Mediterranean coast. The sound of the rigging at night, when the sea is as still as a millpond.

Someone comes out to the terrace. The silhouette of a woman. She sits down at the farthest table, in a corner, near two large urns. A moment later, the receptionist
25 appears, bringing her a drink. Then, instead of going back to the counter, he comes over to B, who is sitting by the edge of the pool, and asks if he and his father are having a good time. Very good, B says. Do you like Acapulco? the receptionist asks. Very much, B says. How was the San Diego? the receptionist asks. B doesn't understand the question. The San Diego? For a moment, he thinks the receptionist is
30 referring to the hotel, but then he remembers that the hotel is called something else. Which San Diego? B asks. The receptionist smiles. The club with the hookers. Then B remembers the card the receptionist gave his father. We haven't gone yet, he says. It's a reliable place, the receptionist says. B moves his head in a way that could mean almost anything. It's on Constituyentes, the receptionist says. There's another club
35 on that avenue, the Ramada, but I wouldn't recommend it. The Ramada, B says, watching the woman's motionless silhouette in the corner of the terrace and the apparently untouched glass in front of her, between the enormous urns, whose shadows stretch and taper off under the neighboring tables. Best to steer clear of the

Ramada, the receptionist says. Why? B asks, for something to say, although he has no intention of visiting either place. It's not reliable, the receptionist says, and his bright little rabbit teeth shine in the semidarkness that has suddenly submerged the terrace, as if someone at reception had switched off half of the lights.

5 When the receptionist goes away, B opens his book of poetry again, but the words are illegible now, so he leaves the book open on the table, shuts his eyes, and, instead of the faint chimes of rigging, he hears an atmospheric sound, the sound of enormous layers of hot air descending on the hotel and the surrounding trees. He feels like getting into the pool. For a moment, he thinks he might.

10 Then the woman in the corner stands up and begins to walk toward the stairs that lead from the terrace up to the reception area, but midway she stops, as if she felt ill, resting one hand on the edge of a planter in which there are no longer flowers, only weeds.

B watches her. The woman is wearing a loose, light-colored summer dress, cut low, leaving her shoulders bare. He expects her to start walking again, but she stands still, her hand fixed to the planter, looking down, so B gets up with the book in his hand and goes over to her. The first thing that surprises him is her face. She's about sixty years old, B guesses, although from a distance he wouldn't have said she was more than thirty. She is North American, and when he approaches she looks up and smiles at him. Good night, she says, rather incongruously, in Spanish. Are you all right? B asks. The woman doesn't understand, and B has to ask again, in English. I'm just thinking, the woman says, smiling at him fixedly. For a few seconds, B considers what she has said to him. Thinking, thinking, thinking. And suddenly it seems to him that this declaration conceals a threat. Something approaching over the sea.

25 Something advancing in the wake of the dark clouds crossing the Bay of Acapulco. But he doesn't move or make any attempt to break the spell that seems to be holding him captive. Then the woman looks at the book in B's left hand and asks him what he is reading, and B says, Poetry. I'm reading poems. The woman looks him in the eyes, with the same smile on her face (a smile that is at once bright and faded, B thinks, feeling more uneasy by the moment), and says that she used to like poetry, at one time. Which poets? B asks, keeping absolutely still. I can't remember them now, the woman says, and again she seems to lose herself in the contemplation of something visible only to her. B assumes she is making an effort to remember, and waits in silence. After a while, she looks at him again and says, Longfellow. And straightaway she starts reciting lines with a monotonous rhythm which sound to B like a nursery rhyme, a far cry, in any case, from the poets he is reading. Do you know Longfellow? the woman asks. B shakes his head, although in fact he has read some Longfellow. We did it in school, the woman says, with her invariable smile. And then she adds, It's too hot, don't you think? It is very hot, B whispers. There could be a storm coming,

the woman says. There is something very definite about her tone. At this point, B looks up: he can't see a single star. But he can see lights in the hotel. And, at the window of his room, the shape of someone watching them makes him start, as if he had just been struck by the first, sudden drops of a tropical downpour.

5 For a moment, he is bewildered.

It is his father, on the other side of the glass, wrapped in a blue bathrobe that he must have brought with him (B hasn't seen it before and it certainly doesn't belong to the hotel), staring at them, although when B notices him his father steps back, recoiling as if bitten by a snake, lifts his hand in a shy wave, and disappears behind the
10 curtains.

The Song of Hiawatha, the woman says. B looks at her. The Song of Hiawatha, the poem by Longfellow. Ah, yes, B says.

Then the woman says good night, again, and makes a gradual exit: first she goes up the stairs to reception, where she spends a few moments chatting with someone B
15 can't see, then she sets off across the hotel lobby, her slim figure framed by successive windows, until she turns into the corridor that leads to the inside stairs.

Half an hour later, B goes to their room and finds his father asleep again. For a few seconds, before going to the bathroom to brush his teeth, B stands very straight at the foot of the bed, gazing at him, as if steeling himself for a fight. Good night, Dad, he
20 says. His father gives not the slightest indication that he has heard.

On the second full day of their stay in Acapulco, B and his father go to see the cliff divers. They have two options: they can watch the show from an open-air platform or go to the bar restaurant of the hotel that overlooks the cliff. B's father asks about the prices. The first person he asks doesn't know. He persists. Finally, an old ex-diver
25 who is hanging around doing nothing tells him what it costs: six times more to watch from the hotel bar. Let's go to the bar, B's father says without hesitating. We'll be more comfortable. B follows him. The other people in the bar are North American or Mexican tourists wearing what are obviously vacation clothes; B and his father stand out. They are dressed as people dress in Mexico City, in clothes that seem to belong to
30 some endless dream. The waiters notice. They know the sort — no chance of a big tip — so they make no effort to serve them promptly. To top it off, B and his father can hardly see the show from where they are sitting. We would have been better off on the platform, B's father says. Although it's not bad here, either, he adds. B nods. When the diving is over, having drunk two cocktails each, they go outside and start
35 making plans for the rest of the day. Hardly anyone is left on the platform, but B's father recognizes the old ex-diver sitting on a railing and goes over to him.

The ex-diver is short and has a very broad back. He is reading a cowboy novel and doesn't look up until B and his father are at his side. He recognizes them and asks what they thought of the show. Not bad, B's father says, although in precision sports you need experience to judge properly. Would I be right in guessing that you were a sportsman yourself? the ex-diver asks. B's father looks at him for a moment and then says, You could say that. The ex-diver gets to his feet with an energetic movement, as if he were back on the edge of the cliff. He must be about fifty, B thinks, so he's not much older than my father, but the wrinkles on his face, like scars, make him look much older. Are you gentlemen on vacation? the ex-diver asks. B's father nods and smiles. And what was your sport, sir, if I might ask? Boxing, B's father says. How about that, the ex-diver says. So you must have been a heavyweight? B's father smiles broadly and says yes.

Before he knows what is going on, B finds himself walking toward the Mustang with his father and the ex-diver and then all three get into the car and B listens to the ex-diver giving his father instructions as if he were listening to the radio. For a while, the car glides along the Avenida Costera Miguel Alemán, but then they turn and head inland, and soon the tourist hotels and restaurants give way to an ordinary cityscape with tropical touches. The car keeps climbing, heading away from the golden horseshoe of Acapulco, driving along badly paved or unpaved roads, until it pulls up beside the dusty sidewalk in front of a cheap restaurant, a fixed-price place. The ex-diver and B's father get out of the car immediately. They have been talking all the way, and while they wait for B on the sidewalk they continue their conversation, gesturing incomprehensibly. B takes his time getting out of the car. We're going in to eat, his father says. So it seems, B says.

The place is dark inside and only a quarter of the space is occupied by tables. The rest looks like a dance floor, with a stage for the band, surrounded by a long balustrade made of rough wood. At first, B can't see a thing, but then his eyes adjust to the darkness and he sees a man coming over to the ex-diver. They look alike. The stranger listens attentively to an introduction that B doesn't catch, shakes hands with his father, and a few seconds later turns to B. B reaches out to shake his hand. The stranger says a name, and his handshake, which is no doubt meant to be friendly, is not so much firm as violent. He does not smile. B decides not to smile, either. B's father and the ex-diver are already sitting at a table. B sits down next to them. The stranger, who turns out to be the ex-diver's younger brother, stands beside them, waiting for instructions. The gentleman here, the ex-diver says, was heavyweight champion of his country. So you're foreigners? his brother asks. Chileans, B's father says. Do you have red snapper? the ex-diver says. We do, his brother says. Bring us one, then, a red snapper Guerrero style, the ex-diver says. And beers all around, B's father says, for you, too. Thank you, the brother murmurs, taking a notebook from

his pocket and painstakingly writing down an order that, in B's opinion, a child could remember.

Along with the beers, the brother brings them some savory crackers to nibble and three rather small glasses of oysters. They're fresh, the ex-diver says, putting chili
5 sauce on all three. Funny, isn't it. This stuff's called chili and so's your country, he says, pointing to the bottle full of bright-red chili sauce. Yes, intriguing, isn't it. Like the way the sauce is the opposite of chilly, he adds. B looks at his father with barely veiled incredulity. The conversation revolves around boxing and diving until the red snapper arrives.

10 Later, B and his father leave. The hours have flown by without their noticing and by the time they climb into the Mustang it is already seven in the evening. The ex-diver comes with them. For a moment, B thinks they'll never get rid of him, but when they reach the center of Acapulco the ex-diver gets out in front of a billiard hall. When he has gone, B's father comments favorably on the service at the restaurant and the
15 price they paid for the red snapper. If we'd had it here, he says, pointing to the hotels along the beachfront, it would have cost an arm and a leg. When they get back to their room, B puts on his bathing suit and goes to the beach. He swims for a while and then tries to read in the fading light. He reads the Surrealist poets and is completely bewildered. A peaceful, solitary man, on the brink of death. Images, wounds. That is
20 all he can see. And the images are dissolving little by little, like the setting sun, leaving only the wounds. A minor poet disappears while waiting for a visa to admit him to the New World. A minor poet disappears without a trace, hopelessly stranded in some town on the Mediterranean coast of France. There is no investigation. There is no corpse. By the time B turns to Daumal, night has already fallen on the beach; he
25 shuts the book and slowly makes his way back to the hotel.

After dinner, his father proposes that they go out and have some fun. B declines this invitation. He suggests to his father that he go alone, and says that he's not in the mood for fun; he'd prefer to stay in the room and watch a film on TV. I can't believe
30 it, his father says. You're behaving like an old man, at your age! B looks at his father, who is putting on clean clothes after a shower, and laughs.

Before his father goes out, B tells him to take care. His father looks at him from the doorway and says he's only going to have a couple of drinks. You take care yourself, he says, and gently shuts the door.

Once he's on his own, B takes off his shoes, looks for his cigarettes, turns on the TV,
35 and collapses onto the bed. Without intending to, he falls asleep. He dreams that he is living in (or visiting) the city of the Titans. The dream is an endless wandering through vast dark streets that recall other dreams. And in the dream his attitude is

one that he knows he doesn't have in waking life. Faced with buildings whose voluminous shadows seem to be knocking against one another, he is, if not exactly courageous, unworried or indifferent.

5 A while later, B wakes up with a jolt, and, as if responding to a summons, turns off the TV and goes to the window. On the terrace, half-hidden in the same corner as the night before, the North American woman is sitting with a cocktail or a glass of fruit juice in front of her. B observes her indifferently, then goes back and sits on the bed, opens his book of Surrealist poets, and tries to read. But he can't. So he tries to think, and to that end he lies down on the bed again, with his arms outstretched, and shuts
10 his eyes. For a moment, he thinks he is on the point of falling asleep. He even catches an oblique glimpse of a street from the dream city. But soon he realizes that he is only remembering the dream; he opens his eyes and lies there for a while, contemplating the ceiling. Then he switches off the bedside lamp and goes back over to the window.

The North American woman is still there, motionless. The shadows of the urns
15 stretch out and touch the shadows of the neighboring tables. The reception area, fully lit, unlike the terrace, is reflected in the swimming pool. Suddenly, a car pulls up a few yards from the entrance of the hotel. His father's Mustang, B thinks. But no one appears at the hotel gate for a long time, and B thinks he must have been mistaken. Then he makes out his father's silhouette climbing the stairs. First his head, then his
20 broad shoulders, then the rest of his body, and finally the shoes, a pair of white moccasins that B, as a rule, finds profoundly disgusting, but the feeling they provoke in him now is something like tenderness. The way he came into the hotel, he thinks, it was like he was dancing. The way he made his entrance, it was as if he had come back from a wake, unconsciously glad to be alive. But the strangest thing is that, after
25 appearing briefly in the reception area, his father turns around and heads toward the terrace; he goes down the stairs, walks around the pool, and sits at a table near the North American woman. And when the guy from reception finally appears with a glass, his father pays and, without even waiting for him to be gone, gets up, glass in hand, goes over to the table where the North American woman is sitting, and stands
30 there for a while, gesticulating and drinking, until, apparently at the woman's invitation, he takes a seat beside her.

She's too old for him, B thinks. Then he goes back to his bed, lies down, and soon realizes that all the sleepiness that was weighing him down before has evaporated. Still, he doesn't want to turn on the light (although he feels like reading); he doesn't
35 want his father to think (even for a moment) that B is spying on him. He thinks about women; he thinks about travel. Finally, he goes to sleep.

Twice during the night, he wakes up with a start and sees that his father's bed is empty. The third time, day is already dawning and he sees his father's back: he is

sleeping deeply. B turns on the light and stays in bed for a while, smoking and reading.

5 Later that morning, B goes to the beach and hires a surfboard. This time, he has no trouble reaching the island. There he has a mango juice and swims for a while in the sea, alone. Then he goes back to the beach by the hotel, returns the board to the boy, who smiles at him, and takes a roundabout way back to the hotel. He finds his father in the dining room drinking coffee. He sits down beside him. His father has just shaved and gives off an odor of cheap aftershave that B finds pleasant. On his right cheek there is a scratch from ear to chin. B considers asking him what happened last night, but decides not to.

10 The rest of the day goes by in a blur. At some point, B and his father walk along a beach near the airport. The beach is vast and lined with wattle-roofed shacks where the fishermen keep their gear. The sea is choppy; for a while B and his father watch the waves breaking in the bay of Puerto Marqués. A fisherman tells them that it's not a good day for swimming. You're right, B says. His father goes in for a swim anyway. B sits down on the sand, with his knees up, and watches him advance to meet the waves. The fisherman shades his eyes and says something that B doesn't catch. For a moment, he loses sight of his father's head, and his arms stroking seaward. Now there are two boys with the fisherman. They are all standing, looking out to sea, except for B, who is still sitting down. A plane appears in the sky, curiously inaudible. B stops looking at the sea and watches the plane until it disappears behind a rounded hill covered with vegetation. He remembers waking up, exactly a year before, at the Acapulco airport. He was returning from Chile, on his own, and the plane stopped in Acapulco. He remembers opening his eyes and seeing an orange light with blue and pink overtones, like the fading colors of an old film, and knowing then that he was back in Mexico and safe at last, in a sense. That was in 1974, and B had not yet turned twenty-one. Now he is twenty-two and his father must be about forty-nine. B closes his eyes. Because of the wind, the fisherman's and the boys' cries of alarm are unintelligible. The sand is cold. When he opens his eyes, he sees his father coming out of the sea. He shuts his eyes and doesn't open them again until he feels a large wet hand grip his shoulder and hears his father's voice proposing that they go eat turtle eggs.

There are things you can tell people and things you just can't, B thinks disconsolately. From this moment on, he knows the disaster is approaching.

35 In spite of which, the next forty-eight hours go by in a placid sort of daze, which B's father associates with what he calls "the Idea of the Holiday." (B can't tell whether his father is serious or pulling his leg.) They go to the beach; they eat at the hotel or at a moderately priced restaurant on the Avenida López Mateos. One afternoon, they

rent a boat, a small plastic rowboat, and follow the coastline near their hotel, along with the trinket venders who peddle their wares from beach to beach, travelling upright on surfboards or in very shallow-bottomed boats, like tightrope walkers or the ghosts of drowned sailors. On the way back, B and his father even have an
5 accident.

B's father steers the boat too close to the rocks and it capsizes. In itself, this is not dramatic. Both of them can swim reasonably well and the boat is made to float when upside down; it isn't hard to right it and climb in again. And that is what B and his father do. Not the slightest danger at any point, B thinks. But when both of them
10 have climbed back into the boat, B's father realizes that he has lost his wallet. Tapping his chest, he says, My wallet, and without hesitation he dives back into the water. B can't help laughing, but then, stretched out in the boat, he looks over the side, sees no sign of his father, and for a moment imagines him diving, or, worse, sinking like a stone, open-eyed, into a deep trench, above which, on the surface, in a
15 rocking boat, his son has stopped laughing and begun to worry. Then B sits up and, having looked over the other side of the boat and seen no sign of his father there, either, jumps into the water, and this is what happens: as B goes down with his eyes open, his father is coming up (they almost touch), holding his wallet in his right hand. They look at each other as they pass, but can't alter their trajectories, or at
20 least not right away, so B's father keeps ascending silently while B continues his silent descent.

For sharks — for most fish, in fact (flying fish excepted) — hell is the surface of the sea. For B (and many, perhaps most, young men of his age), it sometimes takes the form of the seafloor. As he follows in his father's wake, but heading in the opposite
25 direction, the situation strikes him as particularly absurd. The bottom isn't sandy, as he had for some reason imagined it would be; there are only rocks piled on top of one another, as if this part of the coast were a submerged mountain range and he were near a high peak, having hardly begun the descent. Then he starts to rise again, and looks up at the boat, which seems to be levitating one moment and about to sink the
30 next; he finds his father sitting right in the middle, attempting to light a wet cigarette.

Then the lull comes to an end, the days of grace in the course of which B and his father have visited various bars in Acapulco, lain on the beach, and slept, eaten, and even laughed, and an icy phase begins, a phase that appears to be normal but is ruled
35 by deities of ice (who do not, however, offer any relief from the heat that reigns in Acapulco); hours of what, in former days, when he was an adolescent, perhaps, B would have called boredom, although he would certainly not use that word now — disaster, he would call it, a private disaster whose main effect is to drive a wedge between B and his father, part of the price they must pay for existing.

It all begins with the reappearance of the ex-diver, who, as B realizes straightaway, has come looking for his father, and not for the family unit constituted by father and son. B's father invites the ex-diver to have a drink on the hotel terrace. The ex-diver says that he knows a better place. B's father looks at him, smiles, and says, O.K. As
5 they go out into the street, the light is beginning to fade. B feels an inexplicable stab of pain and thinks that perhaps it would have been better to stay at the hotel and leave his father to his own devices. But it's already too late. The Mustang is heading up the Avenida Constituyentes, and from his pocket B's father takes the card that the
10 receptionist gave him days ago. The night spot is called the San Diego, he says. In the ex-diver's opinion, it's too expensive. I've got money, B's father says. I've been living in Mexico since 1968, and this is the first time I've taken a vacation. B, who is sitting next to his father, tries to see the ex-diver's face in the rearview mirror, but can't. So first they go to the San Diego and for a while they drink and dance with the girls. For each dance, they have to give the girl a ticket bought beforehand at the bar. To begin
15 with, B's father buys only three tickets. There's something unreal about this system, he says to the ex-diver. But then he starts enjoying himself and buys a whole bundle. B dances, too. His first dance partner is a slim girl with Indian features. The second is a woman with big breasts who seems to be preoccupied or angry for a reason that B will never discover. The third is fat and happy, and, after dancing for a little while,
20 she whispers into B's ear that she's high. On what? B asks. Mushrooms, the woman says, and B laughs. Meanwhile, B's father is dancing with a girl who looks like an Indian and B is glancing across at him from time to time. Actually, all the girls look like Indians. The one dancing with his father has a pretty smile. They are talking (they haven't stopped talking, in fact), although B can't hear what they are saying.
25 Then his father disappears and B goes to the bar with the ex-diver. They start talking, too. About the old days. About courage. About the cliffs where the ocean waves break. About women. Subjects that don't interest B, or at least not at the moment. But they talk anyway.

Half an hour later, his father comes back to the bar. His blond hair is wet and freshly
30 combed (B's father combs his hair back), and his face is red. He smiles and says nothing; B observes him and says nothing. Time for dinner, B's father says. B and the ex-diver follow him back to the Mustang. They eat an assortment of shellfish in a place that's long and narrow, like a coffin. As they eat, B's father watches B as if he were searching for an answer. B looks back at him. He is sending a telepathic
35 message: there is no answer, because it's not a valid question. It's an idiotic question. Then, before he knows what is going on, B is back in the car with his father and the ex-diver, who talk about boxing all the way to a place on the outskirts of Acapulco. It's a brick-and-wood building with no windows, and inside there's a jukebox with songs by Lucha Villa and Lola Beltrán. Suddenly, B feels nauseous. He leaves his
40 father and the ex-diver and looks for the toilet or the back yard or the door to the street, belatedly realizing that he has had too much to drink. He also realizes that

apparently well-meaning hands have prevented him from going out into the street. They don't want me to get away, B thinks. Then he vomits several times in the yard, among stacks of beer boxes, under the eye of a chained dog; having relieved himself, he looks up at the stars. A woman soon appears beside him. Her shadow is darker
5 than the darkness of the night. If it weren't for her white dress, B could hardly have made her out. You want a blow job? she asks. Her voice is young and husky. B looks at her, uncomprehending. The whore kneels down beside him and undoes his fly. Then B understands and lets her proceed. When it's over, he feels cold. The whore stands up and B hugs her. Together they gaze at the night sky. When B says he's
10 going back to his father's table, the woman doesn't follow him. Let's go, B says, but she resists. Then B realizes that he has hardly seen her face. It's better that way. I hugged her, he thinks, but I don't even know what she looks like. Before he goes in, he turns around and sees her walking over to pet the dog.

Inside, his father is sitting at a table with the ex-diver and two other guys. B comes up
15 behind him and whispers in his ear: Let's go. His father is playing cards. I'm winning, he says, I can't leave now. They're going to steal all our money, B thinks. Then he looks at the women, who are looking at him and his father with commiseration in their eyes. They know what's going to happen to us, B thinks. Are you drunk? his father asks him, taking a card. No, B says, not anymore. Have you taken any drugs?
20 his father asks. No, B says. Then his father smiles and orders a tequila. B gets up and goes to the bar, and from there he surveys the scene of the crime with manic eyes. It is clear to B now that he will never travel with his father again. He shuts his eyes; he opens his eyes. The whores watch him curiously; one offers him a drink, which B declines with a gesture. When he shuts his eyes, he keeps seeing his father with a
25 pistol in each hand, entering through an impossibly situated door. In he comes, impossibly, urgently, with his gray eyes shining and his hair ruffled. This is the last time we'll travel together, B thinks. That's all there is to it. The jukebox is playing a Lucha Villa song and B thinks of Gui Rosey, a minor poet who disappeared in the South of France. His father deals the cards, laughs, tells stories, and listens to those of
30 his companions, each more sordid than the last. B remembers going to his father's house when he returned from Chile in 1974. His father had broken his foot and was in bed reading a sports magazine. What was it like? he asked, and B recounted his adventures. An episode from the chronicle of Latin America's doomed revolutions. I almost got killed, he said. His father looked at him and smiled. How many times? he
35 asked. Twice, at least, B replied. Now B's father is roaring with laughter and B is trying to think clearly. Gui Rosey committed suicide, he thinks, or got killed. His corpse is at the bottom of the sea.

A tequila, B says. A woman hands him a half-full glass. Don't get drunk again, kid, she says. No, I'm all right now, B says, feeling perfectly lucid. Then two other women
40 approach him. What would you like to drink? B asks. Your father's really nice, says

the younger one, who has long black hair. Maybe she's the one who gave me the blow job, B thinks. And he remembers (or tries to remember) apparently disconnected scenes. The first time he smoked in front of his father: he was fourteen; it was a Viceroy cigarette; they were waiting in his father's truck for a freight train and it was
5 a very cold morning. Stories of guns and knives, family stories. The whores are drinking tequila with Coca-Cola. How long was I outside vomiting? B asks himself. You were kind of jumpy before, one of the whores says. You want some? Some what? B says. He is shaking and his skin is cold as ice. Some weed, says the woman, who is about thirty years old and has long hair like the other one, but dyed blond. Acapulco
10 Gold? B asks, taking a gulp of tequila, while the two women come a little closer and start stroking his back and his legs. Yup, calms you down, the blonde says. B nods, and the next thing he knows there is a cloud of smoke between him and his father. You really love your dad, don't you? one of the women says. Well, I wouldn't go that far, B says. What do you mean? the dark woman says. The woman serving at the bar
15 laughs. Through the smoke, B sees his father turn his head and look at him for a moment. A deadly serious look, he thinks. Do you like Acapulco? the blonde asks. Only at this point does he realize that the bar is almost empty. At one table there are two men drinking in silence; at another, his father, the ex-diver, and the two strangers playing cards. All the other tables are empty.

20 The door to the yard opens and a woman in a white dress appears. She's the one who gave me the blow job, B thinks. She looks about twenty-five, but is probably much younger, maybe sixteen or seventeen. Like almost all the others, she has long hair, and is wearing shoes with very high heels. As she walks through the bar (toward the bathroom), B looks carefully at her shoes: they are white and smeared with mud on
25 the sides. His father also looks up and examines her for a moment. B watches the whore opening the bathroom door, then he looks at his father. He shuts his eyes and when he opens them again the whore is gone and his father has turned his attention back to the game. The best thing for you to do would be to get your father out of this place, one of the women whispers in his ear. B orders another tequila. I can't, he
30 says. The woman slides her hand up under his loose-fitting Hawaiian shirt. She's checking to see if I have a weapon, B thinks. The woman's fingers climb up his chest and close on his left nipple. She squeezes it. Hey, B says. Don't you believe me? the woman asks. What's going to happen? B asks. Something bad, the woman says. How bad? I don't know, but if I was you I'd get out of here. B smiles and looks into her eyes
35 for the first time: Come with us, he says, taking a gulp of tequila. Not in a million years, the woman says. Then B remembers his father saying to him, before he left for Chile, "You're an artist and I'm a worker." What did he mean by that? he wonders. The bathroom door opens and the whore in the white dress comes out again, her shoes immaculate now, goes across to the table where the card game is happening,
40 and stands there next to one of the strangers. Why? B asks. Why do we have to go?

The woman looks at him out of the corner of her eye and says nothing. There are things you can tell people, B thinks, and things you just can't. He shuts his eyes.

As if in a dream, he goes back out to the yard. The woman with the dyed-blond hair leads him by the hand. I have already done this, B thinks; I'm drunk; I'll never get out
5 of here. Certain gestures are repeated: the woman sits on a rickety chair and opens his fly, the night seems to float like a lethal gas among the empty beer boxes. But some things are missing: the dog has gone, for one, and in the sky, to the east, where the moon hung before, a few filaments of light herald dawn. When they finish, the dog appears, perhaps attracted by B's groans. He doesn't bite, the woman says, while
10 the dog stands a few yards away, baring its teeth. The woman gets up and smooths her dress. The fur on the dog's back is standing up and a string of translucent saliva hangs from his muzzle. Stay, Fang, stay, the woman says. He's going to bite us, B thinks as they retreat toward the door. What happens next is confused: At his father's table, all the card players are standing up. One of the strangers is shouting at
15 the top of his voice. B soon realizes that the man is insulting his father. As a precaution, he orders a bottle of beer at the bar, which he drinks in long gulps, almost choking, before going over to the table. His father seems calm. In front of him are a considerable number of bills, which he is picking up one by one and putting in his pocket. You're not leaving here with that money, the stranger shouts. B looks at the
20 ex-diver, trying to tell from his face which side he will take. The stranger's, probably, B thinks. The beer runs down his neck and only then does he realize that he is burning hot.

B's father finishes counting his money and looks at the three men standing in front of him and at the woman in white. Well, gentlemen, he says, we're leaving. Come over
25 here, son. B pours what is left of his beer onto the floor and grips the bottle by the neck. What are you doing, son? B's father says. B can hear the tone of reproach in his voice. We're going to leave calmly, B's father says, then he turns around and asks the women how much they owe. The woman at the bar looks at a piece of paper and reads out a sizable sum. The blond woman, who is standing halfway between the table
30 and the bar, says another figure. B's father adds them up, takes out the money and hands it to the blonde: What we owe you and the drinks. Then he gives her a couple more bills: the tip. Now we're going to leave, B thinks. The two strangers block their exit. B doesn't want to look at her, but he does: the woman in white has sat down in one of the vacant chairs and is examining the cards scattered on the table, touching
35 them with her fingertips. Don't get in my way, his father whispers, and it takes a while for B to realize that he is speaking to him. The ex-diver puts his hands in his pockets. The one who was shouting before starts insulting B's father again, telling him to come back to the table and keep playing. The game's over, B's father says. For a moment, looking at the woman in white (who strikes him now, for the first time, as
40 very beautiful), B thinks of Gui Rosey, who disappeared off the face of the earth,

quiet as a lamb, without a trace, while Nazi hymns rose into a blood-red sky, and he sees himself buried in some vacant lot in Acapulco, vanished forever, but then he hears his father, who is accusing the ex-diver of something, and he realizes that unlike Gui Rosey he is not alone.

- 5 Then his father walks toward the door stooping slightly and B stands aside to give him room to move. Tomorrow we'll leave, tomorrow we'll go back to Mexico City, B thinks joyfully. And then the fight begins.