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### ALL MEN ARE LIARS

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To Craig Stephenson,

who never lies
ALL MEN ARE LIARS

“I said in my haste, All men are liars.”

Psalm 116:2
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APOLOGIA

“What of a truth that is bounded by these mountains and is falsehood to the world that lives beyond?”

Michel de Montaigne
An Apology for Raymond Sebond

Frankly, I’m the last person you should be asking about Alejandro Bevilacqua. What can I tell you, my dear Terradillos, about someone I haven’t seen for thirty years? I mean, I hardly knew him, or if I did, then it was only very vaguely. To be honest, I didn’t want to know him any better. Or rather: I *did* know him well – I admit that now – but only in a distracted sort of way – reluctantly, as it were. Our relationship (for want of a better word) had an element of courteous formality to it, as well as that conventional nostalgia shared among expatriates. I don’t know if you understand. Fate threw us together, so to speak, and if you asked me now, hand on heart, if we were friends, I would have to confess
that we had nothing in common, apart from the words _República Argentina_ stamped in gold letters on our passports.

What draws you to this man, Terradillos? Is it the manner of his death? Is it that image – which still haunts my dreams even though I didn’t see it with my own eyes – of Bevilacqua lying on the pavement, skull crushed, blood running down the street to the drain, as though wanting to flee from his lifeless body, as though refusing to be a part of such an abominable crime, of such an unjust, unforeseen ending?

I think not. You are a journalist, in love with life. You’re a man of the pulsing world, I’d say, not an obituaries junkie. Far from it. It’s the truth you’re after, the living proof. You want to lay these facts before your readers, though they may not be much interested in someone like Bevilacqua, a man whose roots once delved into the soil of Poitou-Charentes (which, let us not forget, is your region too, Terradillos). You want your readers to know the truth – a dangerous concept if ever there was one. You hope to redeem Bevilacqua even as he lies in the grave. You want to equip him with a new biography assembled from other people’s memories. And all this for the earth-shattering reason that Bevilacqua’s mother hailed from the same corner of the world as you. It’s a lost cause, my friend! Do you know what I suggest? Find another personality
– some colourful hero or notorious celebrity – of whom Poitou-Charentes can be really proud, like that heterosexual faggot Pierre Loti or that inquisitive egg-head, Michel Foucault, darling of Yankee universities. You’re good at writing learned articles, Terradillos, I can tell, and I know about these things. Don’t waste your time on dross, or the hazy recollections of an ageing curmudgeon.

And, to return to my first question: why me?

Let’s see. I was born at one of the many staging posts of a prolonged exodus, one that took my Jewish family from the Asiatic steppes to the steppes of South America; the Bevilacquas, by contrast, travelled straight from Bergamo to what would become the Province of Santa Fé towards the end of the eighteenth century. In that remote colony, those adventurous Italian settlers established a slaughterhouse; to commemorate their bloody achievement, in 1923 the mayor of Venado Tuerto bestowed the name Bevilacqua on one of the minor streets of the eastern zone. Bevilacqua père met the girl who would become his wife, Marieta Guittón, at a patriotic celebration; they were married within a few months. When Alejandro was a year old, his parents were killed in the rail disaster of 1939, and his paternal grandmother decided to take the boy to Buenos Aires, where she opened a delicatessen.
Bevilacqua (who, as you know, was annoyingly fastidious about details) once made a point of telling me that the family’s business had not always been in tripe and cold cuts, and that, centuries ago, back in Italy, a Bevilacqua had been surgeon to the court of some cardinal or bishop. Señora Bevilacqua took pride in those vague but distinguished roots, preferring to ignore the Huguenot Guittóns. She was what we used to call a font-kisser, and I believe that in seventy years she never missed a day’s Mass, until the heart attack that left her crippled.

My friend Terradillos, you think that I can paint you a portrait of Bevilacqua that is at once spirited, heartfelt and true to life; that you can pour my words straight onto the page, adding a dash of Poitiers colour. But that is precisely what I cannot do. Bevilacqua certainly trusted me; he confided in me some very personal details of his life, filling my head with all kinds of intimate nonsense, but, truth be told, I never understood why he was telling me all these things. I can assure you that I did nothing to encourage him – on the contrary. Perhaps he saw in me, his fellow countryman, a solicitude that wasn’t there, or he decided to interpret my evident lack of affection as pragmatism. One thing’s for sure: he turned up at my house at all hours of the day and night – oblivious to my work or my need to
earn a living – and he’d start talking about the past, as though this flow of words, of his words, could recreate for him a world that, in spite of everything, he knew or felt to be irredeemably lost. It would have been pointless to protest that I did not share his condition of exile. I had left Argentina when I was ten years younger than him, a teenager yearning to travel. After putting down tentative roots in Poitiers, I moved on to Madrid, hoping it would be a good place to write, shouldering some of that resentment that Argentines inevitably feel towards the capital of the Mother Country while never actually surrendering to the commonplace of living in San Sebastián or Barcelona.

Don’t take these observations the wrong way: Bevilacqua was not one of those people who plant themselves on your couch and then can’t be shifted. On the contrary, he seemed incapable of the slightest rudeness, and that was what made it was so hard to ask him to leave. Bevilacqua possessed a natural grace, a simple elegance, an understated presence. Tall and slim, he moved slowly, like a giraffe. His voice was both husky and calming. His heavy-lidded eyes – typically Latin, in my opinion – gave him a sleepy appearance, and they fixed on you in such a manner that it was impossible to look away when he was talking to you. And when he reached to grab at
your sleeve with those fine, nicotine-stained fingers, you let yourself be grabbed at, knowing that any resistance would be futile. Not until the time came to say goodbye would I realize that he had led me to waste a whole afternoon.

Perhaps one of the reasons why Bevilacqua felt so at home in Spain – even more so in those grey years – was that his imagination favoured dreams over concrete reality. In Spain – I don’t know if you agree – everything has to be made obvious: they put signs on every building, plaques on every monument. Of course people who really know that pretentious village perceive Madrid as something else, semi-hidden, mysterious; the plaques are deceptive, and what the tourists see is simply a mise-en-scène. For some strange reason, he gave more credence to the shadowy evidence before him than to the substance of his own memories and dreams. Even though he had suffered, for decades, from political fabrications and press deception in our own country, he placed a surprising faith in the press fabrications and political deception of his adopted country, arguing that the former had been a pack of lies but that these were truths.

Do you see what I mean? Bevilacqua made a distinction between true falsehood and false truth. Did you know that he had a passion for documentaries,
the drier the better? Before I knew that he was going to publish a novel, I never would have guessed that he had any talent for writing fiction, because he was the only person I knew who was capable of spending a night watching one of those films that follow a day in an Asturian meat-processing plant, or a sanatorium in the Basque mountains.

Now, don’t go imagining that I did not think highly of him. Bevilacqua was – let me find the mot juste – very sincere. If he gave you his word, you felt obliged to take it, and it would never occur to you that this might be an empty gesture or mere formality. He was like one of those men I used to see as a boy in Buenos Aires – thin as a pencil, dressed in double-breasted suits, their black hair glossy with brilliantine beneath their Shabbat hats – who used to greet my mother as we walked to market. My mother (who knew about these things) said that these men’s tongues were so clean that one could find out whether or not a coin was made of silver by placing it in their mouths: if it was false, it turned black from the slightest contact with their saliva. I think that my mother, who was a harsh judge of people, would have taken one look at Bevilacqua and declared him mensch. He had something of the provincial gentleman, Alejandro Bevilacqua, an unruffled air and an absence of guile which meant that one toned down jokes in his
presence and tried to be accurate about anecdotes. It’s not that the man lacked imagination, but rather that he had no talent for fantasy. Like St Thomas, the Apostle, he needed to touch what he saw before he could believe it was real.

That is why I was so surprised the night he turned up at my house and said he’d seen a ghost.

Where was I? Those countless mornings, afternoons and nights that I spent listening to Bevilacqua drone on about dull episodes in his life – watching him smoke cigarette after cigarette, rolling them between amber fingers, crossing and uncrossing his legs then jumping to his feet and taking great strides around my room – have merged in my memory into one single, monstrous day inhabited exclusively by this emaciated man. My memory, though increasingly unreliable, is both precise and vague on this point. I mean that it does not consist of a series of clear recollections, but in an agglomeration of brief, confused memories that seem contaminated by literature. I think that I am remembering Bevilacqua, but then portraits of Camus, or of Boris Vian, come to mind.

These days I share Bevilacqua’s greyish hue, if not his emaciation. Inconceivably, I have aged; I have grown fat. He, on the other hand, seems as old as he was when I first met him: today we would say “young”,

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but in those days it was “mature”. I have continued, as it were, the story which we began together, or which Bevilacqua began, in an Argentina which is no longer ours. I know the chapters that followed his death (I was going to say his “disappearance”, but that word, my friend Terradillos, we must not use). He of course, knows nothing of all that. What I mean is that the story he wove and picked apart so many times is now mine. I am the one who will decide his fate, who will make sense of his journey. That is the survivor’s duty: to tell, to recreate, to invent – why not? – other people’s stories. Take any number of events in the life of a man, distribute them as you see fit, and you will be left with a character who is unarguably real. Distribute them in a slightly different way and – voilà! – the character changes, it’s a different person altogether, though equally real. All I can tell you is that I will devote the same care to my story of Alejandro Bevilacqua’s life as I would wish a narrator to devote to my own, when the time comes.

I realize that we’re not talking about a self-portrait here. It isn’t Alberto Manguel you’re interested in. A brief excursion into that tributary will be necessary, however, if we are going to navigate the main river with confidence. I promise not to drag the depths of my own waters, or to linger on its banks. But I need
to explain some shared experiences, and in order to do that a few asides are necessary.

On one of the occasions you interviewed me, Terradillos, I believe I told you how it was that I came to live in Madrid, in the mid-Seventies, renting two small rooms at the top of the Calle del Prado. I had an American scholarship, and enjoyed the sort of robust health one cannot take for granted after thirty. I spent nearly a year and a half there, believe it or not, before events forced me to flee and take refuge here, in Poitiers. At the time, you asked me why I had chosen Poitiers. I’ll answer you now: because I had to leave Madrid, a city that was haunted, for me, by the ghost of Alejandro Bevilacqua. Everything has changed since that time, and these days the city is full of music and light. But on the few occasions that I’ve returned, even when sitting at a café on the Paseo de la Castellana or the Plaza de la Ópera, I’ve felt his presence beside me, his fingers on my arm, the smell of tobacco in my nostrils, the cadence of his voice in my ears. I don’t know if Madrid is particularly prone to such enchantments. You and I know that nothing like that ever happens in Poitiers.

It’s strange, but sometimes I cannot be absolutely sure whether a certain memory is mine or his. Here’s an example: Bevilacqua spoke fondly of the house in Belgrano, where he had lived with his paternal
I also lived in that neighbourhood, with its austere houses and streets lined with jacaranda trees, about seven or eight years after Bevilacqua had moved downtown. Now I no longer know if the house I half-remember is mine, or the one described to me by Bevilacqua, with its coloured-glass door panels, its narrow stairways, the velvet curtain separating the dining area from the sitting room, the chandelier reflected on the mahogany table, the bookcase with its blue volumes of *A Children’s Treasury*, the porcelain figures of the Meissen monkey orchestra, in powdered wigs, playing a silent concert. It may even be an invented house, based on memories that are partly his and partly mine, but I’ll never know now, because the neighbourhood has been torn down to make room for skyscrapers. It would have mattered to Bevilacqua, who was precise even about the detail of his dreams. It doesn’t matter to me.

Bevilacqua believed that he had inherited this obsession with detail from his grandmother, a severe and demanding woman – here in Europe they would say she was not so much Catholic as Lutheran. Throughout Alejandro’s infancy, his grandmother had reminded him that God is always watching us, day and night, with an unblinking eye, and that every gesture, every thought, is registered in his Great Book of Accounts, like the one that lay on the desk in the
delicatessen. Ever faithful to her convictions, Señora Bevilacqua ran her business with exemplary rigour and hygiene, never allowing herself to be seduced by the new wave of supermarkets which were replacing shops like hers with plastic shelving and neon lights. La Bergamota, until well into the 1970s, was the pride of Belgrano.

She was equally rigorous with her grandson. Privations, prohibitions and lashings with the carpet-beater were alternated with rewards and affection. On one occasion, some adolescent nonsense got him locked in his room for three whole days, with nothing more than bread and water to eat or drink. Bevilacqua assured me that this was not an exaggeration: he literally got a slice of bread three times a day and a jug of tap water. There was something medieval about Señora Bevilacqua, something of the embittered, unyielding dowager, with a touch of the overseer.

And yet, in spite of Señora Bevilacqua’s avowed desire that her grandson follow the family tradition, he never felt that his destiny lay among sausages and cheese. After school, before entering the shop redolent of brine, where he helped his grandmother to fish ladlefuls of olives out of the oak barrels, or to turn the handle on the ham-slicing machine, Bevilacqua used to stop in front of the bookshop (at least that’s what I imagine), where the yellow volumes of the
Robin Hood series were displayed in the window, and dream of faraway countries and extraordinary encounters. He imagined himself a Sandokan or a Phileas Fogg, but those distant lands were no further than the Tigre Delta, just outside Buenos Aires, and his Indian princess was the pharmacist’s daughter. Later he realized that he was drawn not so much by the lure of journeys and adventures, but simply by things that appear out of reach.

When did I first see him? In Madrid, in February or March of 1976, at the offices of Quita, our go-between and our nemesis.

Blanca, Blanquita, Blanquita Grenfeld. Larralde de Grenfeld. Always elegant, always bright, always on the crest of the nouvelle vague. Of course you know who I’m talking about! Oh, Terradillos! Fame works in mysterious ways! In Argentina, before the dictatorship, Blanquita Grenfeld was the supreme ruler in the world of culture. She was the younger daughter of the Larraldes, landowners who lost everything in a failed enterprise to raise yaks – or was it camels? – on the pampa. As dark as a mulatta, she was married in her teens to some German industrialist – who was considerate enough to die shortly afterwards – leaving her to enjoy a widowhood that liberated her simultaneously from a groping parent and a dim-witted husband. Blanca
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