

The Old House

The blooming of Latin American literature during the past 15 years (four Nobel Prizes) has introduced readers around the world to "magical realism," a literary blending of commonplace events with strong elements of fantasy. One of the genre's founding fathers is Chile's distinguished novelist José Donoso. In this memoir of Santiago during the 1930s, Donoso shows that "magical realism" may in fact more truly reflect Latin perceptions of reality than most Northerners imagine.

by José Donoso

A sad little tourist industry briefly flourished in one of the most unlikely quarters of old Santiago shortly after the earthquake of 1985. Neither historic nor monumental, this seedy old district to the west of the city boasted an assortment of turn-of-the-century palaces in the French or Italian manner, gimcracks cheaply built of mud and tarted up with rococo plaster of Paris or *finto marmo*.

The rich had once lived here, but they had moved away many decades ago, leaving behind them only these husks of their gentility, now mostly tenements or grim "houses of correction" run by the Secret Police.

After the earthquake, however, sleek cars cruised slowly down the rubble-filled streets, their drivers staring up at the fragments of the façades, unhinged shutters half-open on eviscerated interiors and slivers of sky. Sitting on the curb, children ate pastries bought with the coins they earned by guiding visitors through the spectacularly gutted blocks, often to their former family mansions on forgotten streets, or to a once-hallowed place of worship, its smashed tower, now

prone on the pavement, turned into a barricade where the young profiteers furthered the ancient game of destruction by selling choice bits of consecrated debris. A slow café did slightly brisker trade now, because its shattered window commanded a view over the wooden structures that had upheld the adobe of the recently crumbled "palaces," a wall with a trace of gilt suggesting a salon and polite conversation, now little more than remnants of stage-wings against the twilight of the Magritte evenings.

But most of the homes in the neighborhood were older and plainer than these "palaces." Low, safe constructions of adobe with tiled roofs, they followed the classic Spanish colonial prototype, a few windows opening on the one floor built directly on the sidewalk. Arranged along a series of patios, these narrow old houses were huge and deep, and as secretive as convents.

A few days after the earthquake, I wandered back to that old neighborhood that I hadn't visited for so long, to the first house of my memory. There the stout old thing stood, apparently unper-



José Donoso, on swing, with (l. to r.) his cousin Gloria Echeverria, his younger brother Gonzalo, an older brother, and their pets, in 1937.

turbed by the earthquake, on the familiar street lined with a few smothered linden trees. Just then, as if to disabuse me of my reassurance, someone opened the front door, and I caught a glimpse of crumbled walls blocking up corridors, smashed furniture, and a gaping skylight. I walked quickly past the house, hounded by the resonance of half-forgotten names, by the sway of a curtain in a sick-room half a century ago.

This deep, dark, overpopulated house did not belong to my father, but to three ancient, rich, bedridden great-aunts of his, who had arranged with God to die late and without pain. Each lived in her own quarters off the first patio with its potted palms and its camelia bush. They were fawned over by their own private courts of nurses, nuns, solicitors, servants, and poor relatives who came to visit on the chance of a handout. We went to live with them when economic disaster struck my father, then a very young, easygoing doctor who preferred playing cards and reading all the new

books to seeing patients. He had been the company physician at a newspaper owned by my mother's uncle, but a family scandal had prompted the grand old ruthless man to fire all his relatives.

My father's great-aunts, infuriated by this, begged him to make his home with them; there was plenty of space to house us all in comfort, he would be their doctor-in-residence while he searched for something more profitable, my mother would be a sort of glorified housekeeper, and my small brother and I would bring charm to their lonely, barren lives.

We left another house that I don't remember at all, and settled in on the other side of the first patio, with its plants, its caged canaries, and beribboned cats. The farther one penetrated the house, the less genteel became the surroundings, until finally one reached the innermost patio: the magic core and melting pot of the house, where the hive of servants convened in the evening under the grape arbor next to the smelly chicken coop. Aged and wheezing, these

crones resembled ragged cabbages, dressed in layer after layer of family cast-off clothing.

I once asked why none of them had blue eyes like my aunts. They replied that only the ladies could afford to buy the blue glass cups in which they kept their eyes at night to make them more blue and beautiful, and furthermore, if we went on asking silly questions, the rats that steal the faces of inquisitive children in order to wear them as masks would come to take us to live in the twilight world between the ceiling and the roof where no one ever dared to go.

Their minds half gone, sedentary and fat, they were good for very little except making rose-petal jam (one of them possessed the envied secret) or preparing the fowl traditionally served at the family gatherings. I have the feeling, though, that these were only their apparent occupations. I'm sure they held more mysterious offices, having to do with medicine, perhaps, or with the more frightening realms of religion, better left unexplored by the lay, or, most important, with the maintenance of the collective family memory.

Their imagination, idle for decades, fed on festering remnants, mainly on the repetition of the *petite histoire* of our family. Not of their own families. They belonged to a class bereft of any but the history that attached them to the family of their *señores*, who, centuries ago, had taken their land, ravished their daughters, and established this mongrel, dependent breed. In most cases these women had forgotten their mothers, their brothers, their place of birth, their age. It was a grand occasion when one of

them sallied forth to do an errand in the world, since they never went farther than the nearby church, or to visit other servants very much like themselves a house or two away from ours.

My family, out of frivolity or carelessness or simple convenience, had chosen to forget most of its own history. But these inexorable crones remembered every pain, every humiliation, every illness, every loss we had suffered, which their memories hoarded, embellishing the tales as they retold them again and again until they achieved the proportion of disquieting domestic epics.

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I'm talking of the Santiago of 1930, but dates were irrelevant to these women. They did not record time by calendar, or seasonally, but by deaths and births, the year Carmen was born, the year don Fermín got sick (as he was such an important gentleman, the president had the cobblestones of the block where he lived covered with sand so the passing carriages would not disturb his slumber with their rattle), or the year of a certain wedding or a certain stroke, or someone's trip to Europe, or when someone in the family went bankrupt or ran away with "another woman," or was elected senator or named minister, ignorant of the power and obligations these offices entailed but fully aware of the honor. Words now out of use, names of plants with magical powers, deities unmentionable because the Virgin Mary might become jealous, these were the ashes left by their meager hopes: All of this I loved to listen to.

José Donoso, 63, a former Wilson Center Fellow, is one of Latin America's leading novelists. Born in Santiago, Chile, he studied at the University of Chile and received a B.A. (1951) in literature from Princeton University. He is the author of The Obscene Bird of Night (1979), A House in the Country (1984), and several other novels. His most recent novel, La Desesperanza, is scheduled for publication in English in the spring of 1988. This memoir, drawn from a longer essay, is the first piece Mr. Donoso has written in English for an English-language magazine.

The house was cold, a cold that I have experienced nowhere else. "Comme il fait froid dans les pays chauds!" a French friend used to exclaim, and in the old houses of Chile, the cold of winter in those days had a special edge to it—surely because spring and summer were so glorious—a bite causing chilblains that swelled our hands like magnificent little pink cauliflowers.

As the long dusk of winter set in, the servants under the grape arbor busied themselves piling charcoal on the braziers, lit them, and soon a little blue flame hovered over them like a halo. As it grew darker and the hens went to roost in the chicken coop, the witches fanned the charcoals ferociously with pieces of cardboard. Then the whole patio would light up, alive and crackling with the mad sparks that flew and burst and circled like eccentric constellations around the crones, theatrically illuminating their deeply dented masks of satisfaction, smiling because they had achieved white, odorless coals that would burn slowly into the night. The braziers were then carried triumphantly to the center of our vast rooms where they barely warmed us.

Occasionally, as we were about to drift off to sleep, a servant would steal into our bedroom to drop a snippet of lemon peel, or a piece of sugar, or a verbena leaf into the smoldering charcoal to make the air sweeter for our dreams.

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My father, who later became a doctor of moderate distinction, really hated medicine. He made it clear that he disliked the narcissism of the sick and their obsessive self-pity as much as he hated the reality of their pain. So finally he took to teaching in order not to have to deal directly with people who had harrowing health problems.

He used to warn me against all forms of ambition, whether it be hunger for

power, or for money, or for eminence. Ambition was a quality, or defect, that he despised, and of which he himself was entirely free. He was a passive, well-tempered man, lacking all drive, even the will to choose or decide. What he really enjoyed was playing bridge with his friends, while with his father he played games now defunct: *mus*, *julepe*, *rocambor*—the archaic names sound mysterious today, as mysterious as the Spanish deck with which they were played, reminiscent of tarot cards.

Most of all he enjoyed music, especially Wagner. He used to sit me on his knee to tell me the stories of Lohengrin and Siegfried and of his beloved Parsifal, while we listened to the records on his gothic-style gramophone, with Kundry, his bitch, at our feet. He lent me vast numbers of books, always saying, in his usual indolent, inconsistent fashion: "Beware of literature. If you get too involved in it, like myself, you'll lose your will power and your desire to get on in the world, as I have lost mine." Then he went on to lend me the plays of Victor Hugo, *Hernani* and *Le Roi S'Amuse*, and continued his conversation with his beautiful sister Bertha, who played *Kreisleriana* on the piano, her black braid heavy down her back. My mother was jealous of her sister-in-law because she talked of books, Mother not being much of a reader or a musician, though she richly tended to our imagination in other ways.

No matter how much my father disliked the sick, the three bedridden aunts had to be coped with. His perfunctory attention did not satisfy them. My mother, on the other hand, knew how to keep what was left of their imagination busy, and how to pander to their whims and pettiness. When we arrived at the big old house, the first thing she decided was that one of the larger front rooms should be turned into an oratorio, where a priest would come every Sunday to say mass for the three ailing old ladies and

their various relatives and friends.

The poor sisters, after all, had little with which to amuse themselves apart from their novenas and rosaries, and, of course, their illnesses. As it was, they took Holy Communion only once a year for the feast of Quasimodo, when the priest of San Lázaro, in a gilt and plush sedan chair escorted by choir boys in scarlet bearing crosses and torches, took the Host to the bedridden of the parish. It would be much more amusing for the three old ladies to have Communion every week surrounded by their relatives in their home.

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My parents consulted with the obese Felicinda Bravo, who nursed Aunt Rosa and was the premier servant of the household since she had been longest with the family. She thought it was a great idea, though in her way, she added with modesty, she had already done something towards it.

In a tiny nook adjacent to Aunt Rosa's bedroom she had organized a private shrine that her mistress could see from her bed when the door was open. She herself, every evening, when the other servants were not around to spy, opened it up and knelt at the altar of their own private Christ. When old Felicinda opened the door to her shrine to let my parents in on her little secret, and lit the candles around the lounging, laughing figure enveloped in classical robes, Father was unable to suppress a cry of horror at first, and then a peal of laughter, ordering the uncomprehending Felicinda to blow out the candles, lock up, and hand him the keys. For Father had at once recognized the object of so much devotion: a reduced plaster cast of Voltaire by the sculptor Jean Antoine Houdon. To this sardonic, smiling heretic, the innocent Felicinda had offered years of faithful prayer. Aunt Rosa, mute with arteriosclerosis, had been able to say

nothing about it.

Felicinda explained that she had found the saintly-looking cast ages ago in one of the house's storerooms. It seemed so safe to think it was Christ that she had him brought here to her shrine and . . . and . . . she broke into tears begging not to be dismissed from the family since by now she had nowhere else to go. Father tried to console her. But to the very last years of his life he used to rack his brain wondering how on earth a plaster cast of Houdon's Voltaire got into the storeroom of his aunts' house.

This led my parents to realize that an oratorio was indeed necessary to keep everyone out of mischief. My mother, no believer but a lover of ceremony and costume, ransacked the antique dealers and went to the auctions in order to buy gilded goblets, censers, and candlesticks. She set nuns embroidering and filled trunks with surplices and cassocks. The servants were kept busy starching and ironing. She bought the most fragrant wax candles, the sweetest wine, the purest incense: She was having the time of her life. Father, meanwhile, who, like most lazy people, enjoyed being an agnostic, watched the proceedings with amusement and said nothing when we were called to mass.

What was most spectacular on these Sunday mornings of piety was the arrival of the three old aunts. As they were unable to get up from their beds, the huge, carved mahogany affairs that they inhabited were actually wheeled into the oratorio by the younger members of each of their courts. Propped up on their lace and beribboned pillows, the ladies came in surrounded by their pills, mentholatum, fans, aspirin, thermometers, inhalation kits, and shawls, while a cat slept on the coverlet of each bed.

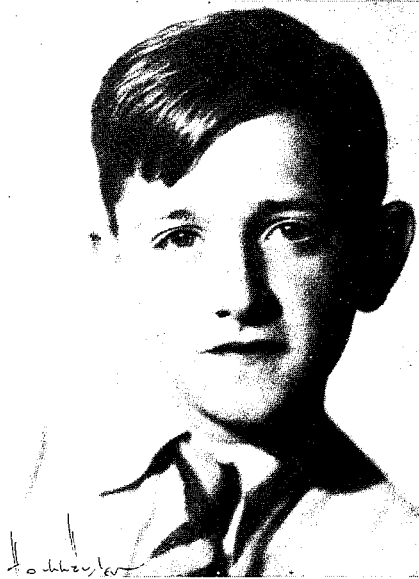
Aunt Rosa, the oldest, was pretty far gone by now. Her head slumped on her breast laden with medals, crucifixes, and scapulars. It was years since she had been aware of what went on around her.

My father assured us she did not suffer: She had no trace of conscience left. But her old servant, the incomparable Felicinda, clad in white and stiff and starched as a queen on a playing card, stood by Aunt Rosa's pillow, saying her beads for her, holding her hand to help her cross herself, and even opening her mistress's toothless mouth for her to receive and mechanically swallow the Host. On her behalf Felicinda answered the Latin of the mass in her own macaronic Latin, beating her well-padded bosom for sins that she surely never committed but which Aunt Rosa, years ago, very well may have.

Though incapable of reply, Aunt Rosa was greeted by her two sisters, who, by marked contrast, never deigned to acknowledge each other. Aunt Tránsito and Aunt Clarissa had had a falling out years ago, and, though they chose to live together, were not on speaking terms. Their problem had arisen a decade before, when, though already old, they were still up and about, and still traveled, especially to the religious meccas of Europe: Loreto, Lourdes, Fatima, or to the canonization of Saint Teresa of Lisieux, where their trouble started.

Both sisters had, on that occasion, vied for one of the two seats made available to the Chilean envoy in the diplomatic section for the ceremony that was to take place in Saint Peter's in Rome. Aunt Clarissa, who was still beautiful and elegant, was chosen as the minister's companion, over her younger sister, Tránsito, who was loud and pushy and used far too much rouge.

When the ceremony began in the glorious basilica, while waiting for the Pope to appear under the *baldachino*, the envoy discreetly nudged Aunt Clarissa, signaling with his stare towards the front row of gold and scarlet chairs reserved for Saint Teresa's family. There, very much at home, sat Aunt Tránsito engaged in gracious conversation with the saint's cousins, who seemed to have no



José Donoso in 1932 at age eight.

problem at all in accepting in their midst this lady from a far-off land, because, of course, anything was preferable to a scandal when the eyes of all Christendom were on them.

Aunt Clarissa blanched with shame. She left Rome immediately after the ceremony, hoping to beat the echoes of her sister's behavior to Paris. She didn't beat them, though. And she left for Chile on the first liner. But the story preceded her even there. The newspapers wanted to know what heretofore unrevealed ties bound her family to Saint Teresa. Aunt Tránsito returned to Chile six months later. Aunt Clarissa refused to see her and never spoke to her again. Both kept to their own beds and to their own quarters in the house that they nevertheless continued to share.

Aunt Clarissa was a bit silly, it is true, but she had beauty and charm, and her laughter rang clear and gentle, always a bit teasing. Everything in her room, even her white Angora kittens with blue

neckbands, was white and light blue, the colors of the Virgin of Lourdes, at whose shrine she had made a vow, pleading to have the use of her legs restored. Since then, she would wear no other color. Her hair, which had been dark, was now snow-white, and those still startlingly beautiful young eyes that she kept at night in little blue cups were large, deep-set, and sapphire-blue.

Vanity, said my unbelieving father, not faith, was why she surrounded herself with these colors: They were becoming to her, and if she remained anything to the end of her life, she remained a coquette. She could have got up and walked, said Father—he was then reading Freud—since there was nothing physically wrong with her legs, but some obscure trauma kept her from using them. I hated him for saying this since I loved to believe every scrap of her sad story of sickness and frustrated miracles.

Though it did not show, for she smiled easily, laughed quickly, and talked of the opera and of Paris—the Paris of Offenbach and Zola, of Auber and Bourget—Aunt Clarissa's life had been far from a happy one. Married the first time to the handsomest and richest man in Chile, discoverer of mines, builder of the first railways, and a daring politician, she lived with him on his estate, Limari, in the barren north. When he could not come down to Santiago with her for the opera season, she received a case of jewels as a present, and was sent to the capital to occupy a box where she sat alone and bejeweled in order to remind the people of Santiago that in the north great fortunes were being made, and that a new social and political attitude was being formed, and that this gorgeous woman of good family belonged to one of those brave men who were transforming the country from a backwater one to a modern democracy.

Aunt Clarissa bore one child, who died of diphtheria when he was four years old and still dressed in a little velvet gown,

as was the fashion then for little boys. A couple of years later her husband died before having the chance to fulfill his promise of greatness. Besides his fortune, he left only a beautiful young widow who cried her eyes out before finally leaving for Paris, where two of her uncles, "Tío Blanco," and "Tío Blest," had been diplomats, and where she could count on having a discreetly good time in order to forget.

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I have heard it said that however much women love their dead husbands, they tend to bloom when they become widows. "The widow who remarries doesn't deserve the privilege of being a widow," I once heard a lady whisper. Aunt Clarissa, even in black and without décolletage or jewels, blossomed in Paris, more beautiful than ever, with her husband's gold tinkling in her purse.

She went to Vichy where she took an impressive villa, read Onhet, Feuillet, and Bourget, saw friends, and after several years of decent widowhood and a number of trips back to Chile to let herself be admired, she remarried in France, this time to the most unlikely personage in the world: a relative and doctor named Augustin Concha, who was working brilliantly with eminent specialists in Paris, and was one of the first urologists in Latin America.

An intellectual to the bone, a connoisseur of art, literature, and especially music, he loved Europe where he had studied and worked for 10 years, but knew he had to return to his country and do something for it. Still, he couldn't tear himself away from the brilliant circle of scientific friends who worked at La Salpêtrière, a circle that included the great neurologist Jean Martin Charcot.

Aunt Clarissa was very tall indeed, stately, gorgeous, not well-rounded and full-blown as the fashion of the day prescribed, but willowy. Her face, designed

by delicate, well-defined bones, had character besides loveliness. Her new husband, Doctor Concha, on the other hand, was small, quite dark, and a sloppy dresser, who read—and had even met—Zola, and was an admirer of Wagner.

They had been married several years when she gave birth to a child, a boy, Cucho Concha, who was later to become the terror of my own and my brother's childhood. Three, four, six years went by, but Cucho alarmingly could not learn to talk, except to mutter in French, sometimes trembling, sometimes shouting, "La locomotive . . . la locomotive . . .," which was practically the only word he knew how to say. Charcot could do nothing with him. I wonder if the young Freud ever saw him. It is the correct time and the correct place and the correct professor, but the old witches of the last patio were, of course, incapable of confirming this possibility.

Cucho was growing. Growing too much and too fast and getting difficult to control, so he had to be taken care of by male nurses who were like strong men from the circus. "La locomotive . . . la locomotive . . .," I can still hear that terrible, meaningless word bellowed in the corridors of the old house. While he screamed, Cucho's mother lay weeping in a froth of lace, unable to understand, to relate, to forgive herself and others, to rest, to move her poor legs.

Doctor Concha had died when Cucho was eight, a broken man who slowly went to pieces at the sight of the raving madman he had sired. A widow again, Aunt Clarissa refused to return to Chile. Her home was France. There they knew how to control her child. Besides, how was she expected to return to display this monster? She lived out the First World War in Vichy, I presume, and returned to Chile in the early '20s, put her son in whatever institution could be found, and went to bed, to live with her sisters. About 10 years later, when Cucho Concha was a giant in his forties,

we went to live with them.

Aunt Clarissa never got up again. It caused her too much pain to hear the insane babble of her giant, who held the household in terror by breaking things and twisting the kittens' necks and kicking the canary cage when he was in a temper, the advent of which nobody could foresee. He was brought to visit his mother only once a week, from three in the afternoon to half past five. My brother and myself were terrified of Cucho, who tried to embrace us in order to kill us—or to caress us, who could know? The two possibilities were equally terrifying.

What we most feared, however, were those occasions when he broke into our bedroom to tear up our books, babbling and laughing while he did it. With the torn-out pages he made tiny, maniacal little books that became tinier and tinier as he folded and folded them over and over themselves with his huge, blunt, yet dexterous fingers. What did this mania mean? He ran around the house kicking the cats, and if he was able to catch one, he broke into his mother's room—she usually locked herself in when he was in a rage—opened a tiny drawer of her secretary and brutally stuffed the squealing, scratching animal into it. He kept the drawer shut by pressing it with his huge palms, laughing all the time, and screaming, "la locomotive . . . la locomotive . . . la locomotive . . .," until the male nurses, who had been sporting with the younger servants in the last patio, came to the rescue.

It was my mother, however, not the male nurses, who could calm him down. Sometimes Cucho repeated obsessively "a las cinco y media . . . a las cinco y media . . ."—"at half past five" in Spanish—just sounds, words of no language to him. Or did they mean something? A desire to go back? A terror of being taken away? Did he hate the place where he was shut up and was he frightened when he felt that the hour of his return



Clarissa Gana de Ossa, José Donoso's aunt, when she was married to a wealthy mine-owner, José Ramón Ossa.

was near? Mother soothed him. When he was very nervous, she went back to the institution in the car with him and his nurses and held his hand while he softly muttered “la locomotive . . .,” plaintive, beseeching, but he had no instrument besides those solitary syllables with which to reach out to the many people he could have loved.

Aunt Clarissa died at 85, to the end a beauty, expert in the art of amusing her friends, mad son or no mad son. She faded away slowly, almost without anyone noticing it, one son in an institution, another in his grave, two husbands in theirs. She was not afraid of death, she used to tell everyone. Nevertheless, Aunt Clarissa died without making a will because the crones from the last patio warned her that it would only bring death and unhappiness. It was best just to pray, they said.

Thus, according to Chilean law, her mad son inherited everything. He was taken to see his mother in her bier. He made no sign of recognition, only turned

away, his attention engaged by a bee buzzing, a cat purring, and then went over to my mother, who was at that time young and lovely, and very gently, for he was fond of her, stroked her cheek and said in French a word no one had ever heard him say before: “Maman . . . maman . . .”

Cucho died a couple of months after his mother, naturally without making a will.

In accordance with the laws of Chile, his property then went to the nation because he had no legal heirs—our own relation to him, after all, was tenuous—and Father was left with nothing but his profession.

I’ve heard it whispered among some people in the family, or it may have been among the older servants, that Cucho did not die a natural death, that he may have been murdered by his two male nurses in a drunken brawl, because they hated him. More likely, however, Cucho just died of indigestion, resulting from a particularly rotten morsel of madhouse cuisine. Who knows? Who cares, at this point? Who remembers Cucho Concha, anyway, except my brother, sometimes, or me as I strolled down the old street among the piles of debris from the earthquake that had not been able to destroy the façade of our old house?

The day of Cucho’s death my brother and I were at the English school we attended. Mr. Jackson, the headmaster, called us in, shook our hands very seriously, warning us that we should be very manly about our kinsman’s demise: Death, after all, was a natural thing. He himself had been in the War (World War I) and knew what it was all about. I must confess, though, that I found the things he was saying rather silly, for who could be sorry for the death of old Cucho? Wasn’t it, at least for us, a sort of deliverance? Our books and animals would be safe. We would never again be crushed in his arms when he caught us.

Of course it was terrible to be glad

that a relative—or anyone for that matter—died. But there it was: One was not perfect and one needn't tell anyone what one felt. It was just a question of going through all the paces, the mass, the funeral, the black band sewn to the arm of our school uniform in sign of mourning, a few days of hushed voices, of conjecture, of visitors, never disclosing one's true feelings because they were sure to change for the better quite soon, and oblivion would then settle everything.

Mr. Jackson's straightforward handshake belonged to a world where there was no hint of murky feelings. That handshake was, in fact, a symbol of the Empire, to which I and my family and the patios where I had until then lived did not belong. I used to shake his hand and say "Thank you, Sir" after he gave me a caning for misbehavior. This compulsory "Thank you" was supposed to signal that I had "no hard feelings." But, in fact, I loathed Mr. Jackson at those moments, and could not for the life of me understand his ethics of fair play, a stiff upper lip, Rudyard Kipling, all monstrously alien and unreasonable to my sense of the world, developed in the dusky rooms of an old house and fostered by protective tale-spinning females who only knew how to play with identity, memory, and time.

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Those rooms, that army of servants and those patios, came to an end soon after Cucho's death, since he was the last of an isolated line. We had to move out, taking with us only memories.

Just as the ancient house was the past, Mr. Jackson's school was the present and the future, at odds with this past. The school was meant, above all, to be "modern," and being "modern," in those far-off days, meant being English, playing sports, and taking a shower every day. This was why Father sent my younger brother Gonzalo and me to this

school rather than to the obvious priests' schools where our relatives went. A secular curriculum was paramount in his conception of modernity.

When we first came to Mr. Jackson's school in 1933, it was attended mostly by English boys, semi-colonials as I remember, mostly sons of transient commercial people, or of engineers sent out to the mines in the north or to the sheep farms in Patagonia. But soon Chilean families began to send their boys there in the hope that they, too, would become modern through contact with English boys with questionable accents. Our masters showed us the map where the small, rabbit-shaped island, red in color, was said to own all those other enormous areas, also red: Canada, Australia, India, Africa.

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Little did we then suspect that in the space of a decade all of that future would be pure past, and it would not be modern anymore to be English, but to be American. The glossy new issues of *Life* and *Time* were instrumental in bringing that truth home to the middle classes of Latin Americans who subscribed to them, and began aping all they saw in those pages.

Mr. Jackson's school turned out not to be as secular as Father had hoped. A Protestant minister came every Saturday to furnish religious instruction. We, and the small group of Catholic boys, stayed out in the garden and played marbles, or tops, or yo-yo, or whatever it was boys played in those days. But as more Chilean boys joined the school, their parents asked Mr. Jackson to organize a parallel class of Catholic religious instruction during the same hour that the Protestants were listening to their minister. And on Saturdays, both the minister with his white collar turned the wrong way around and an honest-to-goodness priest trailing his soutane boomed their different convictions in dif-

ferent halls.

Father, far too lazy to go beyond his characteristic "laissez faire, laissez passer" manner, did not react by taking us out of Mr. Jackson's school when it became religious. Instead, he only requested Mr. Jackson's permission for us not to attend either class, and we remained in the garden playing marbles or practicing cricket.

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We were, of course, looked upon as strange birds by the rest of the school population, just the two of us who could never explain why we did not go to religious instruction, since Father had not bothered to explain it to us. One other boy, Claudio Spies, who claimed to be a Jew, was with us in the garden. This was the time when the hatred for Jews was sweeping the world. We used to ask Claudio what being a Jew meant. I don't remember his answer.

On Saturdays, at school, we were pariahs together. As the wave of anti-Semitism spread over the world, the children who came from their Protestant or Catholic instruction classes chased us around the school garden calling us dirty Jews and throwing stones at us. My brother and I knew that we were anything but Jews, belonging to a long-established Catholic family, something that could be proved not only by the mass and the novenas said in our oratorio, but by the priests and nuns who bore our name. The other boys insulted us because we were different, thus a threat, and in those mad, terrible days Jews were the symbol of all danger.

I must confess that my heart pounded with fear as I awaited the school bell, when the boys from the envied religious instruction classes ran out into the garden. I tried to conceal that fear, even from myself, by playing a violent game of cricket with my brother and Claudio, shouting and quarreling about the score.

One Saturday, when I had been particularly ridiculed as a "dirty Jew," I finally got up the courage to face my father when I came home, and asked him to explain why we had to go through all this. Why couldn't we go to Catholic instruction class since he did not object to our saying rosaries and novenas at home or our going to mass on Sundays? Why was I forced to be different without a reasonable explanation? My father, I fancy, must have thought the required explanation was too long or too complex for my age, or he was not in the mood for it at that moment, when he may have been reading a French novel. So he said, very well, he would phone Mr. Jackson and starting from the following Saturday we could go to Catholic instruction classes if we chose.

I did not pay attention to what the priest said on that first Saturday. I was too happy just being where I was. I can still remember looking out of the window at the young green of spring in the garden, to see Claudio Spies alone, reading a book under a pear tree.

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The rubble from the earthquake has not been completely removed, even now, two years after the catastrophe. There is a presidential decree ordering the denizens of the old houses to clean the rubble away from the streets and the sidewalks, otherwise they have to pay a fine. Chile wants a clean capital no matter what the cost. But people are too poor, especially those living in the shells of the bogus palaces, to repair the façades, much less to cart the dirt away, which is a costly undertaking. Instead, to avoid the fines, which would only go towards enriching the police, most of the people with sizable sections of their façades still standing take the rubbish into the houses, gorging them with debris, leaving only a small section inside to live in. So the dust of destruction has not yet settled on the

graying streets.

Most of the houses on the street where I used to live as a child—called, by the way, and much to the point, calle del Ejercito, or Street of the Army—had elegant balconies of wood, or cast iron, or even wrought iron in the older buildings. The low houses, like ours, had balconies directly on the street, in our case four shallow balconies of cast iron and capacious window-seats.

These balconies were mostly used for the purpose of displaying the female beauties of the family during the processions that took place on certain saints' days, and to shout "Bravo" and "Viva" from, and throw flower petals on the cavalcade of the President of the Republic followed by the equestrian lancers on their way to and from the park a couple of blocks away, on Independence Day. The ladies of the family wove tapestries of flowers for the balconies, and the national flag was flown on the rooftops of every house.

The President of the Republic and his cabinet paraded by in the elegant open "landaus á la Dumont," a gift of Napoleon III to his friend "Tío Blanco," as my great aunts called him, when he was minister of Chile in France.

Rather odd, this formality of attire displayed only on this day, since Chile has always been a country governed "trés en famille." The president, followed by his Great Dane and one bodyguard several paces behind, used to stroll through the downtown area of Santiago to work every day, stopping here and there to talk

to a niece on her way to college, or to remonstrate a businessman with whom he was at odds.

Everyone, in fact, in those days, was at odds with everyone else. But in those days there existed that legal space to disagree in: the parliament, of which we have been dispossessed, with the resulting riots and the debilitating mockery of an agreement when in fact there is none. Years ago, nobody was afraid. Nobody wanted revenge. There may have been unfairness, but the radical sat next to the conservative and next to the communist, all of them in tails and top hats.

Then, when the crowds thickened in the street and the air became tense with the expectation of the presidential parade, with the far-off music of the band, the pounding of the hooves, of soldiers marching and the scent of horses, the three old aunts, made up, primped, happy, showing off their best ribbons and batiste, were wheeled each to a different balcony. When the parade finally passed under their windows, the three old ladies waved handkerchiefs from the depths of their beds, at the powerful whom now they did not personally know, but who showed themselves with such traditional insouciance in the open carriages.

Who would have guessed that an earthquake would tear these houses down in a few decades, and that no president or cabinet member would dare show himself openly in the traditional manner, but instead would speed through the streets in a darkened, bullet-proof Mercedes-Benz?