

# *Schöffling & Co.*

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## **English sample translation**

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While the shooting went on outside, I stayed in my room, hungry, in dull worry over an infection, my thoughts with Ana. I did nothing but wait for them to come for me. There would be no prior notice. The soldiers would come at night or early in the morning; they wouldn't knock. I pictured them dragging me out of the house and beating me onto the back of their truck. I imagined the butt of a rifle breaking my jaw, ran the tip of my tongue over the place where a tooth would have been. I tried to get used in advance to the loss of things previously dear to me, things I took for granted. I thought of my friends, for whom my imagined horrors might be coming true these very moments, of Óscar, our team at CORFO and INTEC. My worry lamed every action, numbed my will, even my hunger.

Señora Lorca, my landlady, had neither a telephone nor a television, and the radio played only guttural instructions or workers' songs or Prussian marches, depending on the station. I knew and learned nothing about the situation outside, could only judge it by the circling of the helicopters used to enforce the curfew and by the frequency of the bursts of gunfire. The events seemed to be mocking me: at CORFO, I had worked on accelerating our information flows, on a system that learns everything and forgets nothing, a rushing river of all knowledge. All at once that river had run dry.

Señora Lorca had left the house months ago for Punta Arenas, where her brother lived. I knew that was a bad sign. She had taken part in the »March of the Empty Pots«, the hypocritical protests against the scarce economy staged by

those who hoarded food in their own basements and garages: the *momios*. She had cut and run because she knew something was coming.

Pinochet's voice on the radio was distorted, frequencies whistled and crackled, but I understood everything I needed to know. I told myself the regime was only a provisional solution, in place for one, perhaps two weeks, a temporary dictatorship. I thought it without believing it; my body, poisoned by panic down to my trembling nerves, knew better.

Why hadn't I left the country? Chile is wedged in at the end of the world between the Andes in the east and the Pacific on the west. North of Santiago, after a last dry gasp of vegetation in the *Norte Chico* begins the gaping emptiness of the Atacama Desert. Which leaves the south. There, though, there are no lands left, no vanishing point, nothing worth hoping for, only the magnificence of indecisive geography and finally the eternal ice. The airport was closed. Even if I'd had the opportunity, I was paralyzed. It was tantamount to a clinical state. You are incapable of decisions, although you can tell by the burning of your nerves that you have to make one, immediately, this very moment. At the same time there's the fear it might be the wrong one, the last one. You hate yourself for the weakness of deciding against your convictions by way of avoiding a decision. When the putsch had begun the day before, everyday life had barely stalled, like a tractor when its harrow keeps getting stuck in rocky ground, until finally it breaks under the tractive forces. Behind every corner, everything wanted to go on as before, wanted to go to the baker or the cobbler or join one of the queues that lined up anywhere vague rumours solidified into available goods. Yet behind every corner, the military was now waiting. Perhaps the soldiers were simply standing around, smoking and staring straight through you with their young dulled eyes. Perhaps they were busy dragging burning tyres off the road. Or cutting off passing women's skirts with shouts and catcalls. Shooting enthusiastically into the sky. At dogs. At the men up against the wall with their arms folded.

And as soon as you'd left the corner behind you and breathed freely again, because a glorious recognition revealed Calle Américo Vespuccio deserted and yet unchanged and you began to persuade yourself it was all a horrific nightmare, you flinched at the next distant volley, and the nearby roar of a helicopter flooded the air and all thought, until your head, your whole body were poured full of fear like a mould for cement.

After we fled from the CORFO building, Óscar and I had been separated. A wound on my shoulder burned but I had no time to take care of it. More than from the pain and fear, I suffered during these hours from the narcissistic scandal of perhaps dying from nothing but the impervious ballistics of a ricocheted bullet. I think that was the greatest shock of that 11 September – that I had spent my previous life in absurd misjudgement of its objective coincidence and that all others too – Ana – would live from now on in a world in which that fundamental error was forever corrected.

I had run some way with Óscar, first up Calle Estado, then Calle Agustinas. Smoke clouded our view; we heard the bombs from the centre of town. It was only later that I learned they had hit *La Moneda* while Allende was composing his last words to the Chilean people inside. »Surely this will be the last opportunity for me to address you. The Air Force has bombed the antennas of Radio Portales and Radio Corporación. My words have no bitterness.« I had a large black suitcase containing documents with me, sketches and blueprints of the ops room, taxonomic diagrams, a few slides, and of course the magnetic tapes. None of it was to fall into the fascists' hands, under any circumstances. Óscar repeated that I didn't have to do it; nothing would happen to me because I was a foreigner. I should give him the case, he said. It didn't just sound like an order; it was one. I just didn't understand why.

»If they catch you with it,« I said, not finishing the sentence. It seemed as though I was asking him for permission to stand by him. It was clear that the soldiers, if they stopped us, would either shoot us on sight or drag us to one of their dungeons to give us electric shocks or dip us in barrels full of excrement.

To extirpate the bacillus of »communism«, as they called it, once and for all. I ran behind Óscar, the case gripped to my chest, up Alameda towards Providencia, past the congress centre where I had first met Ana, leaving Cerro Santa Lucia behind us as tanks crawled past us in the other direction. We ran until we reached the thin brown trickle of the Mapocho, in whose bed the coming dead would be washed through the city by the melt water from the Andes.

*Carabineros* had set up a blockade on the bridge and we ran straight into them. I accepted the premature end to our flight with a lack of passion that dismays me, looking back. The two policemen aimed their rifles at us in a synchronous motion and called out something I didn't understand. Then, as if it were a minutely rehearsed act, we heard machine-gun fire behind us, mortar sprayed out of the wall beside me and before I grasped what had happened the two police officers collapsed in front of us. Turning around as my legs were once again or still moving, I saw soldiers in a military jeep, which did a U-turn and drove off; they were no longer interested in us, yelling as they sped off to some other destination. The humiliation of having my life threatened in passing by the chaotic twitches of such events, while I was so fearfully occupied with ducking beneath the shower of history's sparks, horrified me, yet no one cared about that either, of course, not even me, it seemed; my legs tore me onwards, anywhere, away. A throbbing subsided and sounded by turns in my shoulder; I knew I'd been hit. On the balcony of the Sheraton, where Stanley had stayed on his visits to Santiago, was a small group of men in suits and the best of moods; they raised their glasses in a toast. Ahead of us, in the middle of the road, a dog lay sleepy in the sun. When a fighter plane shot past us low in the sky towards the city centre, the dog jumped up and hobbled off. The glasses clinked up above. The jubilation grew louder the closer we came to Providencia, where we, sweat-soaked and bearded, immediately stood out as the foreign bodies we were there. The *momios* sounded their horns for joy, banged pots and pans, some hoisted a Chilean flag between trees. One man called after us, »You're running now! Run for your lives, you sons of bitches!« Once we'd left the business quarter behind us we passed a car workshop; the gate was up but there

was no one to be seen. The entire street was abandoned but for a few scared dogs. Distant MG rattles echoed between the walls and I heard the snarling of more fighter planes and was amazed at how willingly one comes to terms with the insignia of death as long as they remain un-illustrated. We passed a rusty Renoleta, a Renault 4, and headed for a staircase. The pungent stench of cellulose thinner conjured up an image of my father in his garden shed, filing absently at obscure pieces of metalwork, half-crazed; I couldn't use him here and now, and for an instant I was shocked that the same must have been the case in all the years before. At the top of the stairs, in the workshop office, Óscar spotted a telephone and dialled; the line was dead. On the table was a cup of coffee gone cold, a brown ring around the top; a radio with a crooked piece of wire as an aerial gave off quiet white noise. We were about to go back downstairs and disappear when a troop of soldiers stormed into the garage, chasing two men. I leaned the door I had been opening back closed as slowly as I could and waited with my breath held to see if the soldiers would come up to us. For the meantime they stayed down in the hall, yanking open drawers more out of duty than curiosity and swiping things off the workbenches.

They demanded papers from the two men. I automatically felt for my inside pocket, and for a fraction of a second I felt what they might be feeling. They had left their papers behind or thrown them away, trying to buy time at the price of their identities, time in which something, they hoped, would stop the tide of events. I felt that hope like my own.

The soldiers soon revealed that they were not concerned with checking IDs. Instead, they mocked the obvious students, pushed them around, insulted them as cocksuckers and socialist swine. I looked around for another exit from the office; there was none. In Óscar's watery stare – his breathing fast and shallow – I saw my own impotence, saw the self-accusations for what was about to happen and what neither of us, neither him nor me, would prevent.

Downstairs, angry shouts flared up, indicating that the soldiers had found their excuse for brute force. The two men refused to give their names and berated the soldiers back as dirty fascists. I was fighting my thudding heartbeats and my shortness of breath and a kind of desperate boredom, as I asked myself why we couldn't skip the familiar parts of this predictable game. My thought shocked me; it wasn't a game. As if to prove it, a shot tore me out of my reflections, a scream came from below, and it was clear that while I'd been thinking about predictability and my relationship to it, someone had died. Óscar pressed a hand to his mouth.

Downstairs, an exchange of words that I couldn't understand. Someone was pleading. A second shot, curt and cold. I couldn't help peering through the gap in the door, going against all good sense. One of the soldiers, very young, had been hit by splashes of blood; I was sure the scream had come from him. He looked horrified, but as the unit commander shoved his pistol back in the holster the recruit wiped his sleeve across his face and gave a tortured laugh. His blood-smearred face, denying his own disgust, still sometimes haunts me, even after almost a whole year. We stayed in the office until noon; the soldiers had left long ago. Neither of us spoke or tried to do so. Óscar still had a pack of Hiltons, which we smoked, one after the other, in silence. I tried to concentrate deliberately on my injury from time to time, as if it were the least toll to the situation; at bottom I was ashamed not to be in more pain. We went through the frequencies. Radio Magallanes was still broadcasting, repeating Allende's last speech in an endless loop. »My words have no bitterness, but disappointment. May they be a moral punishment for those who have betrayed their oath: soldiers of Chile, titular commanders in chief, Admiral Merino, who has designated himself Commander of the Navy, and Mr Mendoza, the despicable general who only yesterday pledged his fidelity and loyalty to the government, and who also has appointed himself Chief of the Carabineros. Given these facts, the only thing left for me is to say to workers: I'm not going to resign! Placed in a historic transition, I will pay for the loyalty to the people with my life.«

The contact broke off; it was only much later that I saw the speech in writing. Whenever I've read it since then, I positively hear the solemn intonation with which he transformed his words into a presidential address, melodious and iron words certain of sounding out from the lectern of history. Even in the moment of his downfall, Allende spoke as though he were a man of flesh and blood merely on the side, and for the most part a higher entity of unquestionable integrity. On the worm-eaten floor of the office, squatting between pin-up calendars and engine parts, I didn't know whether to find his hubris in the face of defeat ridiculous or heroic.

The right-wing radio stations announced the curfew over and over again. Anyone caught on the street after 3 p.m. could be shot immediately without warning. We had the choice to leave the garage right now or wait until darkness.

»But what then?« I asked Óscar. I'd be better off trying my luck alone, he told me. Immediately. He'd find a way. He looked at the case as he spoke. Abandoning him was just as much out of the question for me as accepting his mistrust. I opened the door with caution and went down the stairs slowly. I crept past the two corpses, not looking at them, to the open gate and peeked out. There were no soldiers in sight. I fetched layers of newspaper from the adjacent painting hall and used it to cover the bodies. One of the headlines reported on the plebiscite with which the president wanted to have himself confirmed in office to avert a putsch. Allende had intended to announce it to the public today. The keys were in the lock of the jacked-up Renault. I signalled to Óscar, who had searched the workshop in vain for another telephone or a walkie-talkie. »We'll drive,« I said.

»Not we,« said Óscar. There was no mistaking that he wanted to get rid of me. He found good arguments, mentioned his responsibility and my innocence. In all of it, I heard nothing but an insinuation that our project meant less to me than to him or anyone else from our team, because I was a foreigner, because I



ultimately had a choice. Óscar was someone for whom everything came together just how and when he wanted it. He was the project's technical manager and I was his assistant and used to him being right, without question. Now, though, I felt his infallibility was presumptuous.

I released the hydraulics and let the car off the jack. »We'll drive,« I repeated like a Hollywood hero, intending to imply decisiveness. And I really was determined, although I didn't know for what. For one last time, I climbed the stairs to the office and looked around. Then I deposited the case in the hollow space beneath the concave sofa, which had been leaning against the board wall for an estimated ten years and would stay there for the next ten years, untouched by all political regimes and future economic systems. When I came back down the stairs Óscar gave me a questioning look; then he understood. 'No,' he said and shook his head. It was too risky. Taking it with us, I said, was much more of a risk. I didn't say that I saw our escape as seriously endangered by his mistrust; a few moments later he had realized that for himself. His expression was something between apologetic and stubborn, but perhaps I only imagined that. It all went so quickly; a whole previous life in a couple of hours of one morning. I wrote a note that the loan of the car was a »casa de emergencia«, necessitating was Óscar to change it to »caso« – it was an emergency case, not an emergency house. Even after almost two years in the country, my Spanish was still largely a matter of coincidence and I didn't reproach Óscar for correcting me. I was still angry though.

He started the Renault. There was a reason why it was in the workshop, of course: the exhaust pipe was missing and an ear-splitting noise set in; not the ideal conditions for an inconspicuous escape. »Where are we going?« I asked. Óscar didn't reply; I knew he wanted to join his family. He lived in La Reina, a very middle-class area in the east of the city, three quarters of an hour away even on a normal day. It was just after two; at this moment, I later learned, the putschists stormed La Moneda.

The streets were full of soldiers. They marched in small convoys, drove by in jeeps and trucks, checked shops and house entrances. We kept hearing shots and the helicopters' circling had turned into a constant background noise. The Renault was noisy but drove fine, though Óscar had to keep braking because pedestrians or scared dogs crossed the road without warning.

On Tobalaba, where we had to stop at a crossroads, an incendiary device blew up unexpectedly on an immobile tank. It had obviously been thrown from the window of a building. The tank instantly started moving away from the building and, still burning, turned its canon 180 degrees towards the house front. At the same moment as it fired with a massive kick and the grenade ripped away a large section of the outside wall, an old man passed the scene with a donkey cart loaded with junk. He walked not ten yards away from the spot where the rubble rained down in a cloud of dust, but both the donkey and the man appeared absolutely unshaken and continued stoically on their way, as I remember.

As soldiers approached and battered their way into the building, Óscar finally released the brake and broke the spell. We had to keep dodging obstacles – burning barricades, abandoned cars; we saw shopkeepers hurriedly boarding up their stores and running off as if to avoid an approaching storm.

Behind us, above the city centre, smoke filled the sky. I informed Óscar that our cigarettes had run out. The message hung on the air for a while, unheeded, helpless, pathetically conscious of how superfluous it was. Our accident was a coincidence and absolutely unnecessary, as far as necessity isn't a misleading criterion of history in the first place. Driving past, we watched men being led away with arms raised and told to stand in a line. Two hundred yards along, right in front of us, another soldier ordered someone to stop with a wave of his hand. Óscar cursed; it was us he meant. Distracted this way, out of the corner of my eye I saw one of the men in the line, as we drew level with it, open his mouth and stick out his tongue while two soldiers aimed their rifles at him.

It was a grotesque sight. Óscar gave no sign of slowing the car down; the soldier ahead of us yelled something inaudible at us and removed his carbine from his shoulder. Óscar put his foot down on the gas.

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