

# *Los Perdidos*

(2780 words)

Los Perdidos, to whom it may concern,

If this letter stands now in your hands, it means that you have found the body. Here is my account of the events that led to the present situation.

My name is Ernesto Aguirre. I settled down in *Los Perdidos* thirteen years ago. You may have already seen me several times in the city, but you would not remember my face. I am an ordinary looking man: I have learned to blend in a long time ago. When it was a matter of survival. When our country had one coup d'état after the next – each dictator bloodier than the previous one – filling the prisons with so many innocent people. When our tormentors, looking for having fun, were choosing the ones who attracted most their attention.

You must know that I suffer from chronic pain. This embodiment of the tortures I went through in my previous country has shaped me, has moulded my life. I believe it is a way my body and soul have found to purge the ordeal I experienced fifteen years ago. Ironically, one could say that I am blessed. The gnawing and unrelenting suffering absorbs so much of my vitality – like a spoiled and demanding child – that it allows me, most of the time, not to think of my past. The past which was before my hope and faith in humanity were relentlessly shredded into pieces.

I have had to resign myself to accepting this uninvited guest – the chronic suffering. Through the years, my pain and I got to know each other; we have found a weird *modus vivendi*. My golden rule is to try and save on energy, avoiding emotion, walking away from any sense stimuli. I have learned how to lead a kind of sensory deprived existence. One way of achieving this is abstaining from human contact, as much as possible. I cannot afford the luxury of caring. So I live alone and I remain secluded. My personal horizon is the next day. I have no strength nor will to see further ahead.

The only part of me that is still alive is my curiosity. Observant people may have noticed how my eyes, alert and focused, contrast with my insipid appearance. My favourite pastime is to try to smoke out monsters of other people's past – I cannot bring myself to face my own ones – and other demons in disguise. I am like a dog, sniffing hidden stories and secret identities behind the rubbles of lies and deceit. The cyberspace satiates my thirst for answers. The chase is like a safe game. The only one I can play. And it distracts me from the pain.

*The Doctor* settled here after me. For years, he did not seem to have many patients. People here are wary of newcomers, especially foreigners who establish themselves as acupuncturists. They referred to him as *the Chinese*.

He was recommended to me by one of these chatterboxes who cannot help but volunteer advice, even when not invited. I call this category of people *inner peace trespassers*. Unfortunately, they are a plethora.

Before calling him, I did some fast research on his origins. His name was actually not Chinese but Cambodian. I could not manage to remember it; only that the sound of it reminded me of a little stone, hitting briefly two times the flat water before sinking soundlessly. Two short syllables.

The first time I spoke with *the Doctor* on the phone, I was startled by his voice. It was like nothing I had ever heard before. It had no flavour, no relief, as if modelled after the soul-destroying monotony of the endless pampas around here. His elocution was strange, slightly drawling, like a man dragging his feet in old wool slippers. He did not have an accent, but one could hear he was not a local; maybe because his tone lacked passion. Here, when people talk, it evokes overflowing rivers. But his voice was absolutely neutral, devoid of any emotion. Transparent like water running through fingers.

As he opened the door of his consultation office, I could see a man who was neither small nor tall, neither skinny nor fat, neither weak nor muscular. At first glance, his look was bland and neutral. His face was moon-shaped, with no sharp angles. His eyes were just like his voice: totally expressionless. His gaze was elusive. Yet, the parallel curve of his eyebrows and lips, falling downwards at their extremities, betrayed a profound sadness.

A man apparently so unremarkable that he left a deep imprint on me. I recognised the familiar itching in my stomach: the rise of curiosity; the impetuous cavalcade of questions that demand to be answered.

When he started treating me, it was first without touching, like a dance: he was turning around, getting closer and stepping back. It was then that I noticed his hands. They were

hairless, with bulging veins which sometimes seemed to vibrate, as if the blood inside was boiling. His fingers were long and thin, distinguished, while the nails, in contrast, were short, square and deeply ridged: an intellectual man and a farmer, stuck together. The effect was surprising.

He was intensely focused, doing this weird dance around me, his hands agitated, as if trying to grasp a hidden truth. And suddenly, the fingers froze, he cracked his joints and then, he decisively moved forward. He stuck little needles all over my body.

My head was spinning with questions, but his face was so closed that I could just observe in silence.

At the end of the session, he explained that he could not cure the origins of my pain, but only alleviate its symptoms. It would never be over and I would have to come every week.

As I left his office, the protective coat of distrust and bitterness was back on my shoulders. The sun blinded me. I sneezed, usually a terrible thing for me, as it is like an earthquake inside my body, the pain rebounding through all my bones. I stood there, bracing myself, barely daring to breathe. Some seconds passed.

It had hurt, but not like it always does. How was this possible? My brain needed some time to digest the news. Could *the Doctor* really keep the pain at bay? How could I even begin to imagine living without it? It was very unsettling and scary, so I decided to take it one day at a time.

It became a routine to visit his practice, a no man's land with no intrusions from reality. The soft music, the windows closed and blinds down, the fan slowly twirling. Before he started his treatment, he would always rub his hands then crack his joints, as if getting ready for a fight. He always wore the same attire: black trousers and black turtleneck pullover, even when the heat was suffocating. His only exposed skin was his face and hands.

Once, he dropped his guard: pausing to look at his watch and pulling up his sleeve for a brief instant. Enough for me to glimpse the charred skin near his wrist. I instantly recognised the zigzags, criss-cross and wavy patterns, the angry red and hollow yellow. I had the same marks covering my back, the result of severe burning.

I felt a violent charge of electricity through my entire body. Since I already knew his name was of Cambodian origin, I had done some research on his country's history and refreshed my memory about Pol Pot's mass extermination regime. Could he have been a victim of the Khmer Rouge? The dates of the genocide with the Doctor's apparent age seemed to fit.

So *the Doctor* and I were both previous preys of despotic regimes; both trying to come to terms with it, although through different means.

He had seen my body, he knew what it meant.

This invisible link between us, the pillow of unsaid words but shared experiences, made our mutual silences easy and familiar. I felt close to this guarded man, who seemed estranged from the inhabitants of *Los Perdidos*. Just like me.

My curiosity with *the Doctor* was satisfied: I knew what had happened to him, I did not need the details.

I had taken the new habit to walk after sunset in *Los Perdidos*. This instant of the day – when the dark has not set completely, when the wind is gently whispering secrets to your ears and life is at hand’s reach yet not so threatening – felt oddly soothing. A street cat was always following me from a safe distance. He was skeletal and battered, fearful yet hopeful. I guess we were a perfect match.

I was gently preparing myself to re-enter society...

Everything would have gone on like this, but something happened in *Los Perdidos*.  
Something that changed everything.

I remember that day. The wind was unusually subdued. For once, the dust – whose dry and grainy taste always seems to linger in my mouth – had settled down on the earth road and the visibility was almost perfect. I could make out the high mountains bordering the interminable yellow fields of this desolated land. Even the grim cry of the grazing guanacos could be heard. For once, it almost felt like *Los Perdidos* was a normal carefree little town.

I was coming out of *the Doctor*’s practice.

It happened in front of my eyes. It was so unexpected, so violent: an old man I had never seen before was knocked down by a car which disappeared with a screeching sound. Accident or not, no one would ever know for sure.

Frozen, I stared at the motionless body. The crimson puddle on the street was growing slowly – feeding the thirsty sand –, as a circle of whispering bystanders formed. It reminded me of a *corrida* I had seen decades ago: the fascinated crowd, silently watching the bull's agony.

They spoke with low voices, as if they were in a church. They were just watching the old man die. Most have known him as they referred to him as *the German*. There was despise in their tone. Who was he ?

Finally, I came out of my trance and went hurriedly to call *the Doctor*.

In silence, almost reluctantly it seemed, the crowd slowly parted to let him access to the injured man. *The Doctor's* movements were precise and collected. He saved him. When the ambulance was gone, I heard someone asked *The Doctor*: “Do you know who he was?” *The Doctor* muttered while leaving the scene: “It does not matter who he was. I just did my job.”

In a city where suspicion and prejudices dominate like the relentless wind, this was an impressive lesson. After this event, *the Doctor's* practice grew.

This event was a trigger my curiosity could not ignore. I focused my interest on *the German*. Like always, I enjoyed the long and meticulous hunt.



I finally had gathered enough clues to form the conviction that the man had been an efficient cog in the World War II fascist regime but I had no proof. Like several other war criminals, he had escaped and hidden in an isolated place in South-America, *Los Perdidos*, where no one could find him. I was uncertain about my next move. I needed some distance. Consequently, I distracted my attention, reading over some sites from Khmer Rouge's survivors.

A personal account by a prisoner in the S.21 Detention Centre in Phnom Penh caught my attention. The witness confessed to still having nightmares about the tortures he endured between 1975 and 1978. For him, the noises were the worst; especially the tell-tale characteristic dry, curt and high pitched sound of cracked joints all detainees recognised and dreaded. It came from the most appalling tormentor, preparing for his next session by stretching his wrists and fingers. No one seemed to know his name. Unlike the other guards, he never screamed or gesticulated, which made him all the more frightening. Below was a drawing, showing a round face with a sad mouth.

*The Cat* – we were now companions – must have sensed my turmoil because he leaped out of my lap.

There had to be an explanation. The screen of my computer was now blank: I had been staring at it for long, until I finally understood.

Because he gave nothing away, like this blank screen, we all made assumptions. Some from *Los Perdidos* saw him as a model to imitate. I saw a martyr, just like me. He was a

mirror, reflecting our secret hopes or traumas. Maybe it was no coincidence, living in a town named *Los Perdidos*, “the lost ones”.

*The Doctor* had acquired this in-depth knowledge of the human anatomy as a torturer during the Pol Pot regime. I had benefited from these skills. My whole body revolted at the thought that such barbarism had helped me overcome a part of my pain. I felt as if I had been his accomplice.

It was like a vicious implosion in my head: shattering everything on my inside while leaving the exterior unharmed.

I had consciously dropped my guard and I was broken into pieces; once again. The horror from my past was back. But it felt different. Dirty.

I headed straight for the shower. I stayed so long that my skin was scarlet from the rubbing. So long that the scars were swollen from the scrubbing. The purple craters on my body seemed to stare back at me, ominous and reproachful.

These last months, I had nearly managed to see myself as a normal human being. But I was not. I was ugly and scary and abnormal. How could I forget who I was, where I came from?

My face was still plain and boring. But the eyes observing me now in the mirror betrayed a demented person.

Slowly, another image superposed itself on it. *The Doctor* was watching me.

I punched the mirror with my fist. I welcomed the pain, it tasted of blissful innocence. I did not even bother to clean the injuries and wipe the blood.

I sat on the porch – *the Cat* on my lap – trying to organise my confused thoughts, putting together the pieces. Could it be that the Doctor had done all of this, but was now trying to expiate his previous crimes? Then, I remembered what the Doctor had said after saving the life of *the German*.

Was he all along just doing his job: when he treated me, when he saved *the German*, but also when he tortured so many innocent men? Was he just a practical man, lacking any sense of morality, only doing what he was expected to do? Was he just a conscientious man, without a conscience?

What a fool I was to have imagined that we were kindred spirits! How could I have seen mutual respect and understanding in our silences? How could I have possibly forgotten all the lessons from my past?

I saw the storm warnings but it was too late. I was soon engulfed in the darkness and the deafening noise of my rage, trying to hold on to what I could. When it was over, I was breathless and exhausted. I felt completely empty.

The night had reached this specific consistence, when you can define it by the thickness of its silence enveloping everything; a bit heavy but also comforting. *The Cat* was still on my lap but he was not purring anymore. The angle between his neck and body was not normal.

The repulsion and profound sadness for what I had done unwillingly to *the Cat* were now gone.

I looked at the little monticule in my garden and recited a short prayer for him. In my mouth, there was a mixed taste of salt, earth, and blood. But in my heart, there was something soft like *the Cat's* fur. I think it was acknowledgement; peace maybe.

I went inside and checked my face in the spider web shattered mirror. The image was like a violent abstract painting – full of red, brown and white – but my eyes were not crazy anymore. There was a warm light in them. I knew what I had to do, and it brought me solace.

If this letter stands now in your hands, it means that you have found my body. This is my account of the events that led to the present situation.

All the papers regarding *the German* and *the Doctor* are in the attached envelope. You who found my body, you are now the only one to know. You will decide. You will be the judge.

You have to understand: I could not become another monster.