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Diaries for Stefan Zweig

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Diarios para Stefan Zweig

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To the memory of Stefan Zweig.
For Maruchi, Mape, Ariadna, Alexandra, and Lucas.

Only in the first few years of our youth do we associate luck with our destiny. Later we learn that the true path of life emerges from within. Regardless of how many bumps in the road there are and how little sense it seems to make when we stray off the path of our desires, it always leads back to our invisible goal.

Stefan Zweig: *The World of Yesterday.*

How Did Edith's Diary *Appear?*

For the first time, I am able to share the details of Edith von Kekesfalva's Diary *with you. Her intimate thoughts reveal a spiraling tale full of mysteries and hidden secrets, a world of tears and reflections.*

But first I should tell you how I acquired Stefan Zweig's manuscript, which is based on the original diary that she sent him from Switzerland in 1918, just after the end of WWI. You should also know about the events that led up to this publishing audacity. The intrigue, disappointments, and joy I encountered along the way are memories I will cherish forever.

With manuscript in hand, I began my fact-finding journey, which led me to discover that not only was she a real person, but her story also extends much beyond Stefan Zweig's narrative. Edith von Kekesfalva's life is inextricably linked with that of her Cuban husband Federico Lafargue, who she met in Paris in 1921, when they were both foreigners hailing from lost empires: one from Austria-Hungary and the other from the Caribbean.

The story begins with Ungeduld des Herzens *(1939), Zweig's legendary novel, which was translated into English as* Beware of Pity *and into Spanish as* La impaciencia del corazón, *a more literal translation that means "impatience of the heart." However, the discovery of the diary leads us in another direction. Edith and Anton's love, and the inclusion of Federico's notes, alters our perception of those decisive years of the 20th century in European history. Having fled to Europe, Federico, an exile from Santiago de Cuba, dreamt about*

conquering the old world, and time and again, he compares it to his red, white, and black Caribbean.

To obtain the manuscript, I took the express train to Vienna via Zurich and got there around six in the afternoon. As always, I stayed at the Erzherzog Rainer, but this time, the thoughts racing through my head prevented me from enjoying a stroll on the Karlsplatz or reading the Neue Kronen Zeitung. *I didn't even feel like playing with the TV channels in bed. When I finally fell asleep, I only remember that it was late.*

Our meeting was at the Café Landtmann, at ten in the morning, as we had agreed during our last phone conversation. Fearing that the manuscript might be a fake, I thought it prudent not to contact two well-known Zweig translators in Barcelona: Carlos Fortea and Joan Fontcuberta—the unusual offer was for me only. Out of discretion, if I may put it that way, I didn't contact Alfredo Calm either. Not even the ever so astute editor Mario Muchnik… All four, of course, would be as interested as I in that rare offer, which could only be justified after the seller had found out everything he could about me.

I have no idea how many readers the tragic Austrian author has left in this world, but I do know the scholars that specialize in his diverse works. Afraid that they might get ahead of me if they found out, I contacted two that I trust completely before I met with this distant relative of Lotte's (Elisabeth Charlotte Altmann, Stefan Zweig's second wife), but neither one had ever heard of him, much less of the existence of some unpublished manuscript. That possibility was as remote as finding the bracelet that mysteriously vanished from Lotte's wrist between the first and second photos that were taken of the couple after their suicide in Petropolis, near Rio de Janeiro, on February 22, 1942.

On the way to Landtmann's, under the October drizzle that the Viennese always expect after the national holiday, I pondered the questions that I had asked myself a week ago:

Was he just an expert swindler? Could it really be true? What would he tell me about how he found this treasure?

He recognized me as soon as I entered—maybe he had found a picture of me on the internet. Sporting a smile below his scraggly mustache, he came to greet me. We shook hands without saying a word and then he invited me over to sit at his table, to the left of the etched glass door. While he motioned the waitress, I noticed the greenish gray of his eyes and his high, pointy nose, which had a slight bend to it. His mannerisms indicated a man skilled at mingling with ease.

I wondered if his name was really Martin Altmann or if he had simply adopted the last name to add some authenticity to the offer. A black folder was lying on the adjacent chair. Martin, very astutely, noticed that my eyes had wandered off in that direction, that they were caressing those supposedly unpublished papers.

After the usual pleasantries about my trip, the weather, and his admiration of my proficiency in German, we quickly got down to business. His explanation was plausible or at least the information about his family relationship was. His grandmother, Lotte's cousin, had passed away last August, and since he was the only relative with a formal education (being that he worked in the archives of the Museum of Art History), she had left him a trunk full of papers and photographs. Among these, he found the diary, which he was now offering to me not only because he needed the money but also because there was "nobody more qualified" than me to prepare a proper publication—an exaggerated compliment bordering on demagoguery.

He then put the folder on the gray table, opened it carefully, and handed me a few pages so that I could examine the manuscript. I began to sweat because the handwriting looked like Stefan Zweig's, although I would need to have it verified by a calligraphy specialist and have the paper date tested.

Martin put me at ease. Apparently, he had done his research. According to what he found, I was an honest man, incapable of committing fraud, much less against my esteemed Stefan, a Jew and exile like me… To prove his trust in me, he let me borrow a third of the manuscript so that I could be sure and feel confident about closing the deal, which included a considerable number of Euros and a contract that would guarantee him a third of the proceeds in any language.

I'll spare you the minor details, except to say that I ran off to read what would have turned out to be an unexpected twist in the novel, one that perhaps Stefan Zweig hadn't included because it was private, a bit too intimate. Or maybe it was because he thought that the average reader at that time would not understand this romantic young woman, especially considering that we were on the verge of a second military conflict of worldwide proportions and primitive atrocities, as he predicted. It was a war that, as it turned out, would take civilization back to the stone age. But perhaps he had planned to incorporate the diary in a future edition, depending on the reception his novel received from the public and critics.

After reading the first twenty pages, there was almost no doubt in my mind that this manuscript had to be published right away and not only in German and Spanish. For the Spanish version, I would find a translator myself and supervise the rendering of the original text into my native tongue.

After a few days, I made the deal with Altmann at a notary public's office on Lernet-Holenia Strasse. According to the details specified in the agreement, I was free to hire editors and translators. Unfortunately, I could not publish Edith von Kekesfalva's Diary *as a continuation of* Ungeduld des Herzens *because Insel Verlag retained the copyright. In any case, unraveling the mystery required the skills of an astute historian, especially when it came to finding out what happened to*

Edith in the years leading up to her death in 1957, at the age of sixty, in the Engadin Valley of the Swiss Alps.

That is why I feel it is my obligation to offer some additional details regarding my initial find— the diary—which is the reason for this book. A quick reminder about the plot: Die Ungeduld des Herzens *narrates the relationship between Edith von Kekesfalva and Lieutenant Anton Hofmiller, as recounted to Zweig by Anton himself. His subjectivity, after a quarter century that separated him from the actual events, makes a critical dialog with the real story difficult. Moreover, in 1938, the brightest minds of the European intellectual class saw a new war approaching, as did indeed happen, with fatal consequences. In addition, the excesses of Arian racism were well under way, and we all know how it descended on the Jewish community with a devastating vengeance. The way the novel (published in 1939) portrays the soldiers and their heroism, reflects the same, equally critical perspective in that it attributes vanity, frivolousness, boredom, and fear to the causes of valor and describes the twisting path that led to intrepidness. But it's been many years since the first edition was published, and Edith's diary allowed me to make observations from a different vantage point.*

After reading Edith's intimate memoirs, I was able to enrich my appreciation of Zweig's popular, original novel, which has been translated into over ten languages and represented on stage multiple times. And then there are the movie versions: Maurice Elvey's in 1946 and Eduard Molinaro's in 1979. Perhaps I also acquired a better understanding of the author, of his pan-European outlook and vigorous defense of individual liberty, as Maria Schrader documented a few years ago in her film Vor der Morgenröte, *which is based on his memoirs. Schrader's title literally means "before the red dawn," but in the English version, the film became:* Stefan Zweig: Farewell to Europe.

When I finished reading Edith's revelations, I sensed a certain goodwill on my part towards this young woman whose initial curse got me closer to the truly incomprehensible war: the one that we all fight within ourselves. Yet at the same time, since the diary ends with her departure from Austria, I had to retrace her steps because I wanted to find any useful information that could enrich her account. I needed to dig through the archives, look around the Swiss canton where the first events took place, go to Budapest, travel to the Engadin Valley to inquire about her activities there; next, to Paris… My curiosity far exceeded any interest an editor might have. I wanted to find out how the story ended.

Luckily, my efforts were well worth it. But I'll omit minor, perhaps tedious details, regarding interviews with survivors, letters I found, notes from the newspapers of the time… The exciting news about my subsequent investigation was finding three of Federico's notebooks, in which he writes in broad strokes about what happened to him after his abrupt departure from Santiago de Cuba, a departure necessitated by unfortunate circumstances. In those notes, he describes how, at the age of thirty-two, he meets Edith, barely twenty-four, at the Horlogerie Sainte-Catherine in Paris. He falls in love with her almost at first sight, when she says, "It would give me great pleasure getting to know you," and he remembers right away that after Georgette's passing, he was certain that no other woman would ever be interested in getting to know him.

Federico, like his uncle Paul Lafargue, who was Karl Marx's son-in-law and author of The Right to be Lazy, *was also born on the eastern coast, in Santiago de Cuba, a city by a narrow bay that lies between the mountains and the sweltering Caribbean heat, with forty degrees in the shade. Based on the information that I have been able to verify to date, Federico's father shared the same profession as his brother. Both were barrel makers for Bacardi, the famous rum distillery founded*

in Santiago in 1862 by Facundo Bacardí Massó and his wife Amalia Moreau. As was the custom at the time, Federico was born at home, at San Basilio Nr. 74, on January 18, 1889. He was twenty-three years old when he got off the ship in Hamburg, towards the end of 1912. Twenty-four when he visited the grave of his uncle Paul Lafargue and his wife Laura Marx in the Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. Facing the prospect of old age, the famous couple had made a suicide pact, calmly planning everything after watching a movie and eating some pastries in Draveil… The eulogy was given by none other than an exiled Russian by the name of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, known in communist and anarchist circles by the pseudonym Lenin.

As fate would have it, suicide flutters around in this story from the beginning, because it appears that the Lafargue-Marx couple's suicide is inextricably linked with that of the Zweig's. Later, other suicides followed within Edith and Federico's social circle. Being more skeptical than ever, the Cuban's constant reflections reveal his determination not to await old age full of infirmities in a nursing home, losing his intellectual and physical faculties, while remembering Edith.

The advice of a friend who loves detective novels and stories of intrigue is not the only reason that I link the two couples. I have studied a little bit about the so-called Eleusinian mysteries and the beliefs of the Greek philosophers that precede Socrates. The idea of fate dates back to the Delphic rituals, the soothsayer that made annual predictions under the influence of hallucinogens. Why did Edith and Federico meet? Was it destiny or was it fate? The reasons might be unbeknownst to us, but they are nonetheless as real as Mozart's genius or the black swans on a Swiss lake, as real as the racial make-up of the Caribbean or the whipping force of a hurricane.

In the epilogue, I have added some information I found that completes this tale. Of course, there are areas that remain truncated or poorly documented. Perhaps it's because Edith

narrates emotionally, while the events in Federico's diaries tend to be synthesized in the style of the impressionist painters, in other words, through intense and discontinued images.

Edith and Federico entangle their lives just because. Their relationship "blooms because it blooms," like Silesius' rose. This is their story.

Edith von Kekesfalva's Diary

1[1]

I could hang him up by his bootstraps and throw cow dung at him until it slides off his nose. Lieutenant… Ha! More like a little lead toy soldier. An Uhlan forced to ride a donkey, or a sow chased by her litter wanting to suckle tits full of milk.

What comes after the rage subsides? Hiccups, I got the hiccups.

Why is it that Father does not make the proper inquiries before allowing just any cavalry officer into our home? He should have really checked twice with whomever recommended him! I think it was Grossmayer, the pharmacist from The Golden Angel and the garrison's deputy mayor. But no, he blindly trusted his old friend, and to boot, my cousin Ilona tells me that he is very handsome. Not so much! Stiff as starch because he began his career as a cadet when he was eighteen, and now he has been serving the Crown for seven years. That is what he told us at the table while gawking at our spread of Russian caviar, venison in strawberries with mushrooms, accompanied by a Tokaj Grand Reserve from Hungary.

How could he be so absent-minded? What was he drinking? Perhaps something no one should ever indulge in! His mind must have drifted off to a bayonet exercise… It was worse for me, though. I made a fool of myself. A cripple pretending to dance—how grotesque!

[1] For the reader's ease, I have added chapter numbers to Edith's diary and titles to Federico's, but they do not appear in the original manuscripts.

Oh, these legs! Sometimes, when I ask Josef to take me up to the terrace in the elevator so I can sit in view of the pastures on the plain, I entertain myself observing the squadrons engaged in their training. The men are strong and their uniform shrouds them in mystery, like all uniforms. However, when the girls from town, with their white bonnets, run after them, their laughter bounces off my crutches and then I close my eyes tightly. I get all tangled up inside, thinking about the times when I, too, would jump up or climb a tree to pluck some peaches while Father implored me to hold on to a thick branch.

Lieutenant Anton Hofmiller arrived late to dinner. He was unable to conceal his amazement and did not seem to notice my gray, almond-shaped eyes, nor my hair, which I had styled so that the auburn curls over my ears contrasted with my pale, translucent skin.

I looked him over out of the corner of my eye. He handled the silverware with ease and was quick in dealing with a piece of meat that looked like it was about to slip off his fork. The long fingers on his hands are endless, his nails well-formed and pink. He has a distinguished look about him, with a square chin and lively gestures. He is also good with people. Maybe he likes to read. Perhaps we could talk about Hölderlin and read his poems to Diotima, or discuss Schiller… Of course not! An Uhlan who reads? That's impossible! If he reads at all, it would be the military regulations or the ordinances that come down from Vienna.

The French brandy filled his two eyes with blue water, the type of blue that I have only seen once in my life. It was in the Alps, and I must have been nine or ten when we went on that excursion. We took the train from Zermatt to Gornergrat and afterwards we ate raclette, a traditional Swiss dish of melted cheese over potatoes, with pickled cucumbers on the side. Sitting on the sun terrace of the

Kulmhotel, before we rode back down to Zermatt, I saw Anton's eyes in the sky, behind the snow-covered peaks. Today, however, when he finally came over to ask me to dance, his eyes were no longer blue, but black, with a reddish spark, as if a perverse god had turned them into sulfur rocks.

What could this man find attractive in a spoiled seventeen-year-old girl, and even worse, a cripple? Lying here in my bed, while I write these notes and the morning sneaks up on me towards another sad day of exercises causing sharp-shooting pains, followed by massages, I wonder: Being that Anton Hofmiller is merely a second-grade official stationed at the border to the Empire's Hungarian zone, a man who surely frequents brothels full of gypsies and has drunken get-togethers with his buddies in uniform, what interest would he have in this Edith? Would it matter that she is Lajos von Kekesfalva's only daughter?

He is conceited, just like his gold-braided generals and colonels when they dine here and bore us with their exploits in Serbia, Turkey, Bulgaria, or wherever. They don't realize that the Army is only good for one thing—as an escape to nowhere.

I wonder if Anton is familiar with Rilke's poetry. Will he have read *The Notebooks of Malte Laucids Brigge*?[2] Not a chance! He does not have a bloodhound's nose. He cannot even smell the Colombian coffee that we special-order from our storekeeper in Rotterdam.

Why does he interest me? Is it because of what Ilona told me after she saw him at the pastry shop playing chess with the pharmacist? After all, he's quite good looking. Or maybe I'm just bored, but I need strength to make these

[2] In 1914, when Edith writes her diary, Rainer Maria Rilke's *"Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge"* had already been published four years earlier. It is likely then, that Edith had access to his work.

legs walk. In this house, I can only go as far as the terrace at the top of the tower. When I feel anxious, I sometimes think about throwing myself from up high… Then I could close this notebook with the red cover for good.

I don't even know if he has a girlfriend in Linz, Graz, or Salzburg. He might be in love with one of those opera singers that come from Munich to perform at the Volksoper during opera season. This Anton is likely the type that sips the nectar from just about any flower, the type that crumples a carnation the florist is selling at the market. His insolence was evident even in the way he entered the dining room.

Of course, Ilona, with her gossip, managed to get my hopes up. He was supposed to be the most charming and cheerful among the officers, according to Mrs. Grossmayer. Even the florist had commented three weeks ago that Lieutenant Hofmiller had all the soubrettes mad about him and not to mention the maids on their way home, watching him through the casino's stained-glass windows.

Why should he have known about my illness? If he had, he would not have crossed the room to ask me to dance. It was a deference to the hostess, which turned out to be a tragic comedy. How will he ever recover from that? For my part, I dream about getting on the 5 o'clock train to Vienna, coming home tired and happy, talking about what a great time we had. Or better yet, I'll return on the 2:30 morning train after strolling along the Ringstrasse again, maybe with Anton Hofmiller, perhaps sooner than I can imagine.

Along the Ringstrasse… Ilona as chaperone, while the young men that look at us discreetly are faced with Anton's stern but jealous conduct. I wonder what my heels will sound like when they travel without a care on any street in the world. Now all you hear is the tap-tap of my crutches against the ornate, blue-tiled floor, like the litany at an un-

expected funeral, where the casket contains these two legs that will begin to wither, to shrivel despite the massages ordered by Dr. Condor, despite rubbing stinky creams on my skin until it almost tears.

Anton danced with Ilona. Of course, she says that he did not even look at her, so I would not get jealous of her soft, brown eyes and exotic, olive-colored skin that stood out among the whiteness of our guests. Her ample and firm bosom, its shape enhanced by the half-moon bustier, the ease of her melodic swaying to "Roses from the South" by Johann Strauss, did not help.

It was because of her that he accepted the invitation to dinner, because of Kekesfalvas' niece and not their crippled daughter, even though she will inherit the bonds and Swiss bank accounts, the sugar refineries, a saw mill, fertile lands, both owned and leased, the Neoclassical mansion on Jacquin Street in Vienna, six or seven houses in Buda and Pest, this enormous estate built out of yellow rock and a tower with a rooftop terrace, a park full of ancient birch trees, and horse stables big enough for two Uhlan cavalry regiments.

He came to dinner because he was bored and because we are the richest family in the region, the only one capable of hiring two violins, a violoncello, and a piano to accompany our soirees; the only one that could bring a Viennese quartet so the Tokay and Champagne could dissipate with the staccato the pianist drummed on the keyboard.

At the dinner table, he had eyes only for Ilona—of course I noticed that. She pretends, but the evidence was as harrowing as the Austrian defeat in Austerlitz, according to what I read in *War and Peace*. But now I should forget about Anton, the dinner, and his invitation to dance. Maybe I'll read *Anna Karenina*, where I left off, when Tolstoy makes Anna kiss Vronsky…

A lover's kiss probably tastes like lemon juice with salt.

Maybe it smells like fresh snow, with the frozen freshness that accumulates while the flakes fall softly and interrupt your breathing, arresting all unnecessary words.

My first kiss will be with my eyes wide open. I want my ears to buzz and my nose to tickle. And it must be a sunny day. I want to remember it when the winters and wars that loom on the horizon become unbearable, when sadness clouds our windows, and we will barely be able to distinguish the frightful shapes that move clumsily among the ancient trees.

I cannot stand Ilona's hypocrisy, her insincerity when she assured me that Anton, between mouthfuls, had let his blue eyes caress my face several times, when I was fully aware that it was her doe-eyed gaze he was seeking to meet. It was all for her, the one with the bronzed, shimmering skin.

Of course, there were no indiscretions; he acted with the same elegance that he showed when he came to introduce himself on Sunday morning, after receiving the invitation for last night. But we had gone to church, so he left his calling card with Josef, and with that, he satisfied the expected social protocol. So yes, he has good manners, but he was leaning over towards Ilona during dinner.

I remember when the door to the red velvet salon opened, and Anton showed up in the dining room. The vegetable soup had already been served, and some of our dinner guests were having a lively chat about palace gossip and the situation in Sarajevo. Half an hour earlier, we had received a note that he would be arriving late due to some unexpected incident at the regiment. My father removed the napkin that he had tucked into his collar and went to greet him. They exchanged a few words and then he introduced him with a smile: "Lieutenant Anton Hofmiller, our guest by way of Mr. Grossmayer's recommendation."

The empty chair was almost exactly across from mine, but next to Ilona's. Anton was the only military guest, which probably made him uncomfortable. However, thanks to my dear cousin, that didn't last long. She immediately gave him a welcoming smile to put him at ease; successfully, I might say. Soon he engaged her in conversation, and you could tell he was fascinated by her Hungarian accent, with those drawn-out vowels. In contrast, he barely gave me a polite, diplomatic look.

They were enjoying our generosity, and I was waiting for him to dignify my presence with a few words. But no, between the feast in front of him and the red wine, he was admiring her velvety skin, her black mane, and those eyes as dark as coffee. All the while, I was dreading the moment we finished desert and moved to the salon, when he would be embarrassed to notice my unfortunate condition.

The Kekesfalvas, the most elegant family in town, was pretending to appear normal, pouring out a lavish show of happiness to fill the slightest void, but that display would soon be ruined by the tap-tap of a pair of mahogany crutches moving across the floor.

At the table, I heard bits and pieces of their conversation. The heavyset, half-Polish woman sitting to his right, with her loud voice and circus laughter, would often not let me hear, but I enjoyed filling in the blanks, making up information that did not get through to me.

Anton was talking over the crepes being flambéed in the bluish flame of an aged Bacardi rum, which we had ordered from Santiago de Cuba. He must have been astonished at the excesses, in stark contrast to his military mess of boiled potatoes with pepper and greasy pieces of meat, Russian cabbage, and black bread, but he did not say a word about it. Lined up in front of him was an awe-provoking rainbow of liqueurs, contributing further to his insecurity.

The coffee and the Partagas cigars stood in opposition to my malice, which he did not acknowledge with his polite phrases of gratitude for the hosts.

When they went to the salon, he did not notice that I hadn't gotten up—I was waiting for Josef to help me with the transfer to the adjacent room. He was too busy rushing over to join the couples on the dance floor so he could be one of the first. He was enjoying himself going from partner to partner, twirling with a smile, without noticing that Miss Kekesfalva was not performing the role of hostess, that for some reason she was not dancing with the other guests.

Until something unsettled him, and he walked around the wooden stage where the quartet was providing the night's entertainment and came into the dining room. There I was, with my sky-blue dress, feigning interest in what two ladies were talking about, while drumming my torture into the green, malachite table with my fingers.

The moment our eyes met, I knew instantly what was going to happen. I realized that out of pure social obligation, he would ask me to dance and in the scene that followed, his ignorance and my anger would dance in the atrium of the cemetery, amidst a blizzard sweeping down the Carpathian Mountains.

I couldn't help but scream as I tried to get up to accept his invitation. The look of horror in his blue eyes clashed against my gray exasperation. I squeezed my lips together and pushed against the small table, avoiding the planter that I had knocked to the floor. Then I fell back into the armchair again, and with my head on the table, I sobbed while two ladies came to my aid and the quartet stopped playing music.

I suppose he fled from the room, being overcome with vertigo. Later, Ilona told me that they spoke briefly, that Anton excused himself after telling her what had hap-

pened. According to her, it was pitiful seeing the horrified expression on his face, his reaction when she reproached his ignorance.

Ilona came over to see me right away, but it was not to tell me about him. That was later, in my room, where I asked to be taken immediately. She sat right here on this bed and told me: "I insulted him, almost shouting at him that he was an idiot, a fool, a clod." And afterwards she had left him dumbfounded and turned around to let him deal with or drink his own stupidity.

It seems that he was so embarrassed he left without saying goodbye, as we found out from Josef. What a coward! At least I tried to stand up with all my strength, to shake off my ailment as if it were a Gypsy curse. Anton, on the other hand, gave me a lashing and then all he could do was flee… Like a good little lieutenant marching in a military parade, in a procession in front of the emperor!

He must be mortified that gossip about the incident will spread. What if people got word of his clumsiness and he became a laughingstock in town, the butt of jokes in his regiment? For what it is worth, at this hour he must still be awake, like me. Can one sleep after having committed such a gross stupidity? No, that's not possible! Or maybe it is? Without a care in the world… I hope he has nightmares about waking up crippled, like I did after being consumed by fever. I wish he would dream that he is running and suddenly his legs feel like lead, and then he falls into the mud and cannot get up anymore, no matter how desperately he tries to push with his hands and arms. He deserves the treatment with needles that I received at the clinic in Charlottenburg, under the watchful eye of that Prussian butcher.

Federico Lafargue's first entries describe his clandestine departure from the bay in Santiago de Cuba and his journey to Hamburg, where, on October 1912, the cargo ship Manzanillo comes into port flying a Cuban flag. The initial pages of his first notebook appear to have been damaged by the pounding of the waves. They tell of leaving the Cuban coastline behind and of the European dream; pursuing it meant trading one homeland for many, all hanging in the clouds under one big sky.

Along the borders, the black ink in some of the words is smudged, especially at the top of the page. However, those blots, similar to those of watercolor paintings, did not prevent me from determining the meaning. An expert I hired to help me decipher the smudged writing managed to identify the letters that were covered in powdery residue and initially unrecognizable. According to those pages, written during the long days on the Atlantic, the ship, after having navigated through the Windward Passage and before reaching the open sea, almost capsized a few kilometers off the coast of Hispaniola. Most likely it happened around the Hatian Cape, because Federico mentions that they could see some intermittend lights in the distance.

When the hurricane unleashed its merciless fury, the Manzanillo was carrying in its hold a large shipment of turbinado sugar. Controlling the ship required all of the captain's and his crew's experience, as the water rushed over the prow and swept down the deck and into the interior passage ways. With the sea tearing up everything in its path, all four pasengers were huddled in their cabins: Federico Lafargue, Emilio Moreau, Alejo

Valmont, and the unfortunate Regino Bello, whose cabin door was open and jammed. As he stepped outside to try closing it, he was swept away by a wave slamming into the portside. Before crashing back into the choppy sea, it ripped up the rickety, moss-covered taffrail. The spiraling water was covered in white, frothy sea spray, and took Bello with a force that has long been feared by seamen: the Caribe Indians, with their long canoes, the Andalusians in their caravels, the conquerors in their mighty galleons, and countless pirates, colonizers and buccaneers.

His notes describe the farewell until he loses sight of the city and only the mountains of the Sierra Maestra can be seen from afar. After that he writes about the storm, and the last entry is an autobiographical one, apparently written the evening that the Manzanillo enters the Elbe estuary and then makes its way up the river, arriving in Hamburg a few hours later. I finished reading his notebook the evening before Federico climbs down the fragile ladder and goes through customs with his papers in order. He then heads over to the St. Pauli district to look for the address given to him in Santiago de Cuba by his German teacher, Friedrich Michaelsen. His mission: to find Friedrich's cousin, Hermann F. W. Michaelsen, a well-know music lover, piano teacher, and accompanist, who founded Haydn Hall in Federico's home town in 1899, in honor of Franz Joseph Haydn, known as the "Father of the Symphony."

In hasty, capital letters and often without commas, in a style reminiscent of military correspondence or a war diary, but with good orthography, Federico writes the following. I'm omitting quotating marks:

Santiago de Cuba

Departure out of the bay where Santiago lies hidden. I wonder what happened to the other conspirators who plotted against the government? Will they be able to escape? Will I get lost in my journey through Europe in search of the source, of my intertwined roots? How amazing will it be? Will it be like the utopias that uncle Pablo envisioned? What will I encounter? Communism? Anarquism? Will I find my own ideal? Whatever that may be… The adventure of a Caribbean man who doesn't know himself yet. Or anybody else, as it turns out. From the stern I lose sight of Gertrudis' hankerchief and her father's threats. Gone is Morro Castle but her kiss lingers. I can feel the river current surging in me. I will embark on my journey without fear of what I might find. And I will travel until I've had my fill. What is our destiny? Will I find mine?

I think of Teodora reading her Ifá's cowrie shells before serving me breakfast one last time. What does my future hold? The shells speak of a beautiful adventure. Fertile ground for love, according to Ifá. Yemayá is the orisha who protects me. She orders me to carry something blue with me at all times. I need to guard against violence. I will kill someone. And a friend will betray me. I shouldn't stick my nose where it doesn't belong. I will speak other languages. But I should think in my mother tongue. Play without money. Teodora says to me: put this little bag in your suitcase. It contains brown sugar and ebony dust. Bring it with you when you come back to Santiago. Place it on my grave.

Many years will pass. Oh, my child! Bring offerings every so often: some bee honey, a small glass of water with a hint of honey, and some white flowers. She gives me a kiss full of sweetness, like that of a grandmother, then she cries on the way to the kitchen.

Lunch at the big mahagony table. Teodora brings out a big bowl of rice with chicken—chorrera style. Garnished with sweet peppers. To make sure that I won't ever forget. My mother has made potato and egg salad seasoned with papaya vinegar. Pancha prepared fried sweet plantains with cinnamon sticks. I've never known her to get tired. She cleans and cooks and answers to Teodora. I got to meet her grandfather from the Congo. He crossed over from Haiti. I catch my father looking at me out the corner of his eye. He is thinking about the adventure on which I'm about to embark. It's obvious that he is scared for me. But I have to leave… The food is served in silence. They won't be alone though: Mayra is staying. So is Marta, their favorite. Also Carlos with his wood business. And they have six grandchildren, who already came by to say farewell. Carlos left me an envelope full of dollars for any unforseen expenses.

Stove-top custard covered with caramelized sugar. Meringue on top. Teodora smiles and brings coffee. We get up and head towards the door. I asked everyone to stay home instead of coming with me to the wharf. In case the police show up… Even though the port authority lieutentant was paid a good sum of money. Silent farewell kisses in the entryway. Hugs. Tears streaming down our faces. Not a sound. My father insists in coming with me to the brow of the Manzanillo: quiet poise and a secret mission. To be carried out in Paris. If I am able to find the address of the boarding house and the book merchant is still alive. He gives me the code. Everything will be fine.

A true balancing act. The longshoremen walk up the narrow planks with water down below on both sides. Towards the deck. Into the hold. Profuse sweating. Glistening muscles. Ebony everywhere. The Abakuá controls who gets a job. A slave-driver's whip is not necessary. A miserable daily wage is all that's needed. A final line of jute sacks. The same color as brown sugar. I wonder if they are smuggling anything. Marijuana? Tax-free Bacardi rum and tobacco? That is all this picturesque island full of maracas and celebration produces. Maybe coffee. Or a little bit of each…

One last hug. The moorings are released. I stay on the portside. The wharf slowly disappears from sight. I move to the prow. Santiago shimmers in the heat. We cross the narrow mouth of the bay, the steps to El Morro on the right and green hills on the left. The crew slows down as we head out to open sea. Blackish-blue water. On the starboard side, the harbor pilot's boat detaches from the ship and returns to port. Our captain does not strike me as a sea wolf. A chubby guy named Puig. When he takes off his cap, I see a bare top with gray eaves. Not a second later he has his cap back on. I'm sharing a cabin with another passenger. The one next door also has two. And that's it. No one else would fit. My cabin mate introduces himself: Alejo Valmont. Medium stature. Black, straight hair. In contrast to mine: dark brown, tightly curled. His, parted on the side. Thin lips. French accent. His r's are throaty. He seems nice. His preference is for the lower bunk. From Hamburg he plans to take the train to his final destination: Paris. A spectacular sunset on the horizon. Orange and mandarin hues over the Manzanillo's two gray cranes. Then the sun disappears into the ocean. The sea is a bit choppy and the ship rocks back and forth on the waves. The up and down motion is making me dizzy. I feel nauseous.

Dinner with captain Puig. He introduces us to his first and second officers. And to the boatswain. Also to the other two passengers: Emilio Moreau and Regino Bello. There are eight of us at the polished mahagony table. Henry: the Jamaican cook. A darker-colored Negro dressed impecably in white and wearing a toque blanche. He serves the food himself. The galley is right next to the officer's mess. The crew eats in the game room in the back. For us it's Graulax: seasalt-cured salmon with dill and finished with dry cashew wine. Alejo doesn't feel well and excuses himself. He leaves in a hurry to go vomit. For dessert: guava shells with white cheese followed by a toast. Henry tells us in broken Spanish when meals will be served.

Everybody except Emilio and an officer leave. They stay at the table with a bottle of white rum between them.

Black coffee and a few large cookies. My notebook is in my lap. The morning greeted us with a storm swell. Alejo doesn't even get up. The air smells of fermented beans. The rocking continues, but he has nothing left to throw up. The waves have whipped the sea into a frothy foam. The barometer is falling fast. I stop what I'm doing to go help. The coal is fired up in the engine room below. Nobody is allowed on deck or on the bridge: captain's orders. I can hear the wind whizzing through the port hole.

Finally on the third day, the calm after the storm. The sea, a sheet of green, like moss. What a christening! Damn!

Somebody once said that a hurricane is an eye with wings.

We almost paid a visit to Sir Neptune. And his trident. I shake my head. How did we resurface after each avalanche? The roaring of the sea. The howling of the wind. It made for the worst kind of symphony.

We lost Regino. He had the bright idea to go outside to try and close the cabin door that the waves had thrown

open. He was swept out to sea by the water. It washed him away like a toad blasted off the patio with a water hose. He probably didn't even have time to scream. Regino and I had barely exchanged a few words. They have already telegraphed his family.

Alejo swears he'll never set foot on a boat again. Not even for a tourist cruise on the Seine. Emilio spent the night talking to Bacardi. Everyone hits the bottle hard. Almost the entire crew joins him. Dead silence at the table. We are exhausted after the ordeal. Henry serves jerky from Montevideo with boiled sweet potatoes.

What a farewell to Cuba! The Caribbean spinning at 200 kilometers an hour. The crew, six sailors and the chief engineer's four assistants, bring the wet sacks on deck to dry. The officers help as well. I take off my shirt and pitch in to get rid of my stiffness. The sun is beating down on the steel. The horn of another ship greets us on the port side. She has come from over there. I think. Her name is Marqués de Comillas.

Europe? A trip to the millenniums. Alejo says that the Caribbean is an endless melting pot. But is Europe the beginning? I am also crossing the Atlantic for that: to find my roots. But in reality it is to flee from the government and the threats from Gertrudis' father after he saw a mulatto with his daughter who is as white as snow. Oh… Dear Gertrudis! Gertrudis Saco y del Castillo. Forgive me, Sir Antonio Saco. What I had with your daughter was nothing serious. Except my dark anger towards you. But there was nothing besides a few visits by the window. A kiss and a sigh. And that's where I left it, with the flavor of mango on Gertrudis' tongue intertwined with mine.

I am writing in this room where the crew eats and plays. They don't write. I wonder if any of them is even literate? Henry the cook asks me to turn off the light when I leave.

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He sent me a bunch of red roses in a wicker basket. I am sure it came from Mrs. Gurtner's flower shop… What a lovely gesture! I already forgot his clumsiness. My first thought was: He did not know, he never saw me standing up, and he could not have seen my crutches. Social protocol calls for men to stand up when someone is introduced to them; that is why… It was the correct thing to do, inviting the hostess to a dance, waltzing with Edith von Kekesfalva. So he came to my little hideaway in the chair, smiling like a proper gentleman.

The flowers were already in the basket when Josef fetched me for breakfast, so I figure that he brought them by early this morning. He must have barely slept then, like me. So Lieutenant Anton Hofmiller is not what I thought he was. That is why, after several preliminary notes, I wrote him the following on my baby-blue, English stationary:

"My dear lieutenant, you have my warmest gratitude for the beautiful, red roses. Their delicate petals have such freshness and fragrance! Your thoughtful gesture has made me very happy. You are welcome to have tea with us, whenever you like and have the time. There is no need to ask for permission. Please regard ours as your home. For now, you will always find me here."

I wonder if he noticed that I did not mention his faux pas or the way he ran off like a delinquent and fled the soiree, that my words contained not an ounce of resentment. Perhaps he will have the impression that I have forgotten

the incident because his friendship interests me much more than his bewilderment. Will he come?

Oh, Anton, please do come! You have no idea how much I need some distraction! It is not selfishness, but the need to have other young people around me, talking and laughing and quarreling here on this terrace that my father built for me so I could look out over the countryside and observe the cavalry squadron's movements. He thought it would give me joy, but of course he didn't know how so often the energy of the mares makes me bite my lips as I try to contain my inner screams. And sometimes I cannot help but release them into the sky.

I know you won't come today, but perhaps tomorrow, Friday. The truth is, I do not remember your features entirely. When I try to picture them, the details become fuzzy around the edges.

I wish I could forget the note in which I made you believe that nothing had happened, because the memory of that scene, where you approached me to ask for a dance, keeps popping into my mind. I cannot shake it. It is as if a forest gnome were fixated on playing with my mind, heightening my exasperation.

You know so little! You obviously have not suffered much in your life. And not a reproach from me, and much less after knowing that your conscience got the best of you. Now I need you to come here and tell me who you are, where you come from, and what your intentions are.

I will figure out how to retain you, with or without Ilona, because I can always count on my father. Sometimes I catch him looking at my legs, wishing they belonged to someone else, as if regretting his sins, as if God had thrust this punishment on him.

He probably knows, and he does not want to tell me that presumably my muscles have started to atrophy,

and no matter how many massages and exercises are prescribed, or how many injections and remedies I receive, it will spread to my thighs.

They must prevent my illness from getting worse, even reverse it. Hope sometimes seems like a flock of migratory birds, storks that won't build their nests on the church towers and belfries.

How much would we pay for someone else to serve this sentence? My father would lift any family out of poverty, in Europe or on the planet, if his daughter could once again run into his arms when he got home, when she heard the doorbell, like she did just a few years ago.

Our Lady of Mariazell would not have allowed this illness to inflict some poor peasant. What treatments would she have had? How long would she have survived? I read that it can reach as far as the heart…

Although I don't believe that! It is just another story to make more money. I am so glad we found Dr. Condor because when I first fell ill, Father almost had to sell the sugar refinery to pay those swindlers, like that doctor who made us spend some time in Naples. He swore that his ointment, made with lava from Mount Vesuvius and some mysterious herbs—a formula that supposedly dated back to before Pompeii— would have a miraculous effect.

I am not sure that these memories help… Sometimes, when the pressure of my exercise sessions tires me until I almost faint, I imagine myself walking on the Right Bank of the Seine, towards the Champs Élysées, a French poodle by my side. I must tell Anton about it… Because I am almost certain now that the flowers from this morning are a sign that I will get better, that my memories of my strolls and especially my bicycle rides through the Prater will not be tears of impotence.

We will go to the pastry shop at the Kohlmarkt together, perhaps holding hands. On the Kärntner Strasse, we'll look for that store where my father bought me the Spanish doll that now sits on top of the dressing table in my room. Anton will give me another one, a horsewoman from the Spanish Riding School. Vienna will once more become a regular weekend excursion.

I would call the painter who was here two years ago: Egon Schiele.[3] From him, we bought "The Mill," a black and umber oil painting that now hangs in the salon. I look at it when I need the foamy water to fall on my despair and take with it the coagulated blood that prevents my muscles from functioning properly, from dancing.

I'll ask him to take us to his studio. Right now, Egon should be Anton's age, more or less. And since he hates the military, it should turn out to be a wonderful visit, unsettling and irritating when Anton realizes that he is so marvelously despised because of his uniform and his lieutenant stripes. I will enjoy the duel as if it were with pistols at twenty-five meters apart. I will even flirt with Egon so that Anton is overcome with jealousy; after all, Egon could not take his eyes off me during the visit to our house. What a delicious pleasure that will be! Only matched by Egon showing us his latest paintings. Perhaps he hasn't sold "Mother with Two Children" yet and we'll agree on a price.

From reading the papers, I know of the scandals surrounding Egon—the lewd women, naked and legs wide open. He will most likely have some of those scandalous paintings in his studio, like those of Klimt. Anton will see

[3] Egon Schiele (1890–1918) was eleven years older than Edith von Kekesfalva. He had not yet turned twenty-eight when he died in Vienna as a result of the devastating epidemic that swept over Europe. That same year, it killed his teacher Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), whose work represents the height of Austrian pictorial symbolism, which becomes expressionism in Schiele's paintings.

that I am not some prude, modest country bumpkin, with airs of hypocrisy.

Perhaps I could commission him to paint my portrait. Or better yet: have him paint me throwing my crutches off and laughing. The crutches flying to each side towards a heap of stones. And I am running into Anton's arms, but of course he does not appear in the painting.

I imagine I will hardly use this bed because I will have to recuperate the time I lost due to my legs. I dream in sepia and white, like the water that flicks its tongues at the base of the mill, the wheel that turns and turns, churning every desire into foam. I dream awake and I dream asleep.

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