

## **MR. SUESCÚN**

By Mima Peña

Translated into English by Leopoldo Villar

The alarm went off at five twenty-five in the morning, like every day. It was only a couple of hours since he had been able to fall asleep. Blurred ideas filtered through the mind of Mr. Suescún, who for glorious milliseconds felt that he was waking up next to his wife. After a while of disappointment, when he realized his dreadful loneliness, he slipped his hand under the feather blanket that she had insisted on buying so much and with a slap he turned off the button.

Life had become heavy for him and so was his body. It was hard for him to get up. It was hard for him to sleep. Everything was hard for him. He rubbed his eyes while he confirmed his pathetic existence on that bed, in that apartment, in that city of perpetual drizzle. He sat up in the bed and put his feet down, looked at his yellowish and fatty nails, and thought about how quickly life had passed. He remembered that years back he used to get up full of illusion, and smiled bitterly at that young dreamer who had no idea that his nails would turn amber sooner than he imagined.

He wanted to start making coffee but remembered, with the same bewilderment as every day, that the coffee maker had been damaged for months. Immediately his mind connected another thought that

daily followed the previous one: that the coffee maker would remain this useless until the day someone came to remove his corpse and take his things.

He checked his email. He had messages from the bank, the university and his daughter. Ana lived with a boyfriend that Mr. Suescún knew only from a digital photo; a huge Canadian dressed in thick wool sweaters and scarves, lying on the grass beside a blue lake. In the photo he was looking insolently to the camera. Surely Ana had said, *smile that I am going to send this photo to my dad*. Or maybe that raw was the young man's natural expression. Maybe Ana didn't even mention his dad.

He buttoned up one of the six white shirts in the closet. Before, his wife would send his clothes to the laundry, but since Socorro's death Mr. Suescún had convinced himself that he no longer sweated as before. At night, before going to bed, he smelled the clothes he had worn during the day. In general, the clothes exuded a soup odor, similar to what orphanage kitchens smell, but not entirely unpleasant to him. The Canadian in the photo probably didn't wash his hairy clothes often either, he concluded as he adjusted his blue and white striped tie. His arthritic fingers uncapped four vials, he gulped down the pills dry, took the elevator and went down the ten floors to the dark and morbid parking lot that he detested. Squeezed inside his Volkswagen he drove to the university where he had been teaching

Spanish and Spanish literature for years. *What an absurd favor Ana had asked him*, he thought. He would answer her later.

Leaning to the right under the weight of the forgotten compartment briefcase, he crossed the iron gate of the university. So many days walking among young people had immunized him against noise and small talk but not against the manifestations of love, each year more explicit. He entered the cafeteria, which, like every morning, was brimming with greasy fumes and bubbling of students. Knowing himself invisible, he paid for a coffee and a biscuit and sat looking out over the patio. After a while, a couple settled down at the next table; they spoke softly and kissed. The tattooed arms of the woman caressed the man, and how close they were, almost Mr. Suescún too. Without taking his eyes off the patio, Mr. Suescún thought how strange it was to perceive so closely that intimacy, so remote and impossible for him.

He gave the same lesson to three groups of students, trying to dispel an overwhelming feeling of irreparability that was crushing his body. Irreparability of death, of the coffee maker, of his life as he had known it. During the last class, while explaining the Spanish Golden Age, he recited with a rueful expression some words from Cervantes that he felt had been written for him: *Sorrows were not made for beasts, but if men feel them too much, they become beasts*. The students were not moved, they did not quiet down, not even the unbearable creaking of the seats stopped for a few seconds.

Then he sat for a while in one of the rooms adjoining the rectory, and at five o'clock in the afternoon he walked along the cracked and flooded platform to the parking lot. Shrunken in the silence of his Volkswagen, he drove back to his home.

The smell of Socorro still swarmed in the apartment. Mr. Suescún drank from one of the three glasses that he had been using since the day she had died. He did not want to remove anything from its place. It scared him. He approached the window and observed rivers of buses and cars that advanced through the Seventh avenue, people who walked with umbrellas, others who ran to get home, all completely indifferent to the situation of the man with the big face looking out the window. He walked in circles like the animals in the zoo, so used to being locked up that even when the door is opened for them, they keep cornered running around. His tired body finally flopped onto the couch. Night came in and with it the cold, and a nostalgia that barely allowed him to write a few lines pretending to be a normal person.

Dear Anita,

How happy I am to hear from you. Don't worry about me, everything is fine around here. Of course, it is cold and it rains a lot, so I can't wait for this semester to end to go to the farm to feel a little warm.

I spoke with the university chaplain and he is offering a mass for your mother's soul next Monday afternoon. I can't believe six months have already passed. Your mom and I would like you to go to mass that day, take your boyfriend, praying together is good. Your uncle Danilo is still very sick, the doctor told him that he is very brave because it seems that the pain he suffers is very strong. Blessing, Dad.

He felt that Socorro was in the other room, lying on the bed, waiting for him to watch the soap opera together and he almost got up to go look for her. When he realized that he was lonelier than ever, he added:

PS. I don't have the time or the courage to take care of your boyfriend's cousin. Also, if the woman decided to spend her vacation in Colombia, she must be adventurous enough to go banging without the help of an old man like me.

There, in front of the computer, Mr. Suescún remained for a few hours, overwhelmed by the size of his face with the expression of tragedy that he saw reflected on the screen, until a new message from his daughter appeared:

1. Please don't refer to «my mother's soul». Say SOCORRO, MY WIFE, YOUR MOTHER, and leave the matter of the soul. Don't tell me that «YOU AND MY MOTHER WOULD LIKE ME TO GO TO MASS » either. My mother is dead. Don't put words in her mouth.

2. My boyfriend has a name, his name is BILLY. I remind you every time we talk, please try to memorize it.

3. I sent your letter to Billy's AUNT (NOT COUSIN), because she is going on vacation to South America and is going to Bogotá. If she does contact you, PLEASE be nice. Take her to a museum or something. And dad, what is that of the BLESSING that has given you to put at the end of each *email*? How about saying goodbye with another word?

Ana.

Mr. Suescún walked to the kitchen, opened the highest cupboard and discovered towers of squid canned in their ink that he had not seen before. He thought that Socorro, foretelling her death, had left them there just to help him cope with those moments. He found a rusty can opener, fished for the shellfish with his fingers, walked with the can to the window and watched the city settle down.

The days continued to pass: Monday or Saturday, everything seemed to be the same. He opened and savored more cans of squid

until his fingers began to take on purple hues that he could not remove. Only the day of the mass for the six months since Socorro's death had been different; at least he had received the embrace of the priest and of a university professor who happened to be in the chapel. Danilo had excused himself; the chemotherapy sessions were consuming him. Mr. Suescún avoided asking his brother about his health, as if not talking about it made him less terminally ill.

The sordid passing of the days was interrupted only by the ringing of the telephone, which overwhelmed Mr. Suescún, whose head, or rather his heart, always played the cruel trick to make him suppose that his wife would answer the call. Anyway, it sounded little; only some cousins from Socorro asking how he was, or Danilo, or recently someone from the farm finalizing details for the next visit: *Mr Suescún? I hardly hear. Hello? Mr. Suescún? To let you know that we are waiting for you here.* With her clear confusion as always, Eva, the housekeeper, called to report that the rooms or the attic, she did not remember well, had had to be fumigated due to an infestation of bats or black butterflies, but that perhaps the house would be ready for his arrival, *perhaps*, Eva repeated, as her voice faded somewhere in the Eastern Plains.

He held out packing until he got bored to look out the window. He had not entered Ana's room for, perhaps, several years. He opened the closet doors and found packed suitcases, rolled up posters, clothes, and boxes with unknown contents. He took a green leather

suitcase with which they had traveled to Italy. His fingers, like small yuccas, brushed the leather as he remembered Socorro disembarking from the *vaporetto* with that suitcase. The phone rang more inappropriate than ever. He was tempted not to answer but the ringing of the phone irritated him even more.

*Hello!* he spat wearily.

*Good evening, my name is Susan.*

(...) Silence.

*Susan Parker.*

(...) Silence.

*Billy's aunt.*

(...) Silence.

*Ana's boyfriend.*

*Ah...*, Mr. Suescún finally snorted.

The woman explained in a Spanish tinged by a slight American English accent that she had a commission from his daughter Ana. Mr. Suescún suggested that she leave it at the door of his building, before which the woman's tone rose in disbelieving contempt. How to make such a request to a tourist who did not know the city? Or was it that he was not interested in hearing from his daughter? There was a long silence after which Mr. Suescún fully shared the woman's irritation and was even upset with that rude old man. They agreed to meet at noon on Thursday. The woman would visit the Gold Museum located



a few blocks from the university, and then they would meet nearby, in *La Romana*, the noisy and crowded restaurant and the only place where Mr. Suescún had eaten with cutlery since Socorro's death.

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Before walking to the meeting place, Mr. Suescún entered the university bathroom. The students were happy, it was the last day of classes. He pretended to urinate standing up. He had felt asexual for months, and the idea of peeing accompanied by other men was the only thing that reminded him of his gender; it was also a form of tacit communication with his peers, a way of feeling part of a group, the only group to which he still belonged. When he verified that he was alone, he locked himself in the only privy with doors and sat on the toilet seat. His penis sagged off like a dead bird and he peed for a long time. In a couple of days he would be urinating in the warmth of the Eastern Plains, among bats or black butterflies that would not notice his lack of sexuality, he thought. He pulled up his shorts, adjusted his pants, and walked to *La Romana*.

They recognized each other immediately. She was sitting in the middle of the congested restaurant. Pale face, big eyes, gray hair with merry waves. Attractive? He meandered between the tables more than he needed to, trying to hold back an unexpected throb. He shook her hand and sat down across from her. Unusually concerned about the impression he was making, he swallowed and proceeded to apologize in broken sentences for the misunderstanding of the other

day when she had called on the phone: *I was preparing class, correcting exams. I thank you very much for taking the trouble to come here.* Suddenly, she cut him off. As if she were a regular diner in that place, taking advantage of the fact that the waiter was nearby, she asked Mr. Suescún if he wanted to order something to drink.

*Nnoo*, he hesitated.

*A cold beer for me, please*, she asked.

*You speak perfect Spanish*, said Mr. Suescún, more surprised by the content of the request than by the almost imperceptible accent.

*Thank you*, she answered, looking into his eyes with a smile that stirred something inside Mr. Suescún.

The young waiter wrote down the order, swiftly handed over two menus and left Mr. Suescún adrift with an intimacy that he had never expected to feel again in his life.

Mr. Suescún wanted to continue talking but he could not. He was stunned by the woman's smile, so spontaneous and different from Socorro's.

To break the silence, Susan took a package out of her backpack and offered it to him: *Here, Miguel, your daughter sent it to you.* Hearing his name seized him even more. He hadn't heard it for as long time

and less pronounced by a woman. Dazed, but suddenly feeling manly, he took the package and his nervous hands unsealed a jar that read: *Maple Syrup*. She adjusted a pair of thick-framed bifocals and began to study the menu humming naturally. The enchantment of Mr. Suescún with the naturalness and grace of the woman increased until he began to see lights and felt very dizzy.

She noticed something strange in Mr. Suescún's face, and then she offered him the beer that the waiter was putting on the table. He denied the detail with the hand that held the jar of honey, but suddenly reached out with his other hand, like a crossbow, grasped the bottle, took five deep swallows, and breathed easier. He waited for her to order her lunch, and more calmly ordered the lamb with Creole potatoes and the guava sweet. It turned out that Susan had not tasted meat for more than four decades, and that she meditated every morning with a secret mantra. She was seventy-six years old — two years younger than Mr. Suescún— and she had no children. She believed in reincarnation, abortion, and angels, and every day she drank flaxseed water on an empty stomach to move her bowel. She mentioned that she was *seduced* by jazz —a word, or perhaps it was the cadence with which she pronounced it— that woke up the sleeping bird that nested between Mr. Suescún's pants. She lived in Banff, where she worked twice a week in a hotel spa set in the middle of snow-capped mountains; *they look like meringues*, she had said. She shared her little house with her ex-husband. *Albert lives upstairs and I live downstairs. How?* Mr. Suescún said. *Agreements that are made in life, arrangements; don't tell me that you haven't had to give*

*in at this point; settle in, you know. No, I don't know, Mr. Suescún* answered honestly.

When the plate arrived with the lamb bathed in a thick and dark sauce, the aroma took him back to pleasant moments in the house of Socorro's parents. On contact with the fork, the tender meat fell off the bone; then he mashed the yellow potatoes and soaked them in more sauce before putting them in his mouth. He savored each bite, and let himself be carried away by the conversation. He even mentioned with enthusiasm his trip to the Plains. He watched as the woman reached across the table to fish for the brightest guava from his plate, and even smiled without realizing it when she, before putting it in her mouth, asked in her charming accent: *May I?*

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Back at his apartment, he leaned out the window. As if he were a child who did not master the concepts of time and space, he tried to search for Susan Parker in the crowd. He searched for her until the feeling of infidelity knocked him down on the couch. He looked at the clock; it was only six in the afternoon. He opened his email. In his inbox he read: *Message from Susan Parker*. As if he had heard a fire alarm, his chest constricted.

I loved meeting you. Thanks for lunch. As I walked through the cobbled streets of La Candelaria, I thought that I would also like to see the valleys of the Eastern Plains. I just read on Lonely Planet that it is an amazing destination. Can I join you? You mentioned that the

farm is big so I don't think there is a problem. Do I pack??

*Do I pack?* Mr. Suescún repeated, opening his eyes to check the written words. *What does this woman think? That you can go with a widower to a farm infested with bats?* It was the first time he had used that qualifier for him: *widower, widower; what a sorry condition.* He rubbed his big and hot face like a balloon, a water-filled balloon about to explode. *Lonely Planet?*

He read and reread the message, but especially the first sentence: *I loved meeting you.*

He went to the kitchen. He took the jar of syrup sent by his daughter, used all his strength until he could uncap it, found a piece of old bread and dipped it in the jelly while trying to organize his emotions. His teeth ached. With marshmallow breadcrumbs glued to his white shirt he traveled the usual orbit, leaned into the window, returned to the computer and answered:

Dear Mrs. Parker,

Perhaps I did not comment, but I travel to the farm with my brother, who is ill, it may be uncomfortable for you and for him. I was also pleased to have met

you. I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay in Colombia.  
Sincerely, Miguel Suescún.

Before pressing «send» he wondered if *pleased* was too expressive a word, but decided that at her candid request the word hardly matched the tone of the conversation. On the other hand, during lunch he had treated her with the formal *you* but she had always addressed him with the familiar *you*. *Could it be that she likes me? Or was it that she just wanted to get to know the Plains and save on transportation and accommodation?* He remembered Susan's smile and wished it was the first. Then he modified the message:

Dear Susan,

I travel with my brother, who is ill, it may be uncomfortable for you and him. I was also pleased to have met you. I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay in Colombia.

Miguel

He sent the message and remained in front of the screen. His anxious face still looked about to burst. An answer from her lit up on the screen, and immediately his large face was drenched in sweat. During the next eight hours they exchanged several emails. The old bread ran out, but he continued to swallow the syrup helping himself

with his fingers. The plans were taking form, as well as the apprehensions of Mr. Suescún.

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After a hell of a traffic, compounded by hundreds of street vendors and clouds of burning gasoline, the little Volkswagen finally made it out of town. They advanced through dark tunnels into whose walls weeds and trickles of water filtered until the panorama opened to a grandiose landscape of vast pastures and hills where the air became crystalline. They went down around a mountain on a narrow road covered by ferns and bushes on one side, and cut off by a cliff on the other. Bushes laden with bananas and others with lavender orchids perfumed the air, which was getting colder and colder. Mr. Suescún looked in the rearview mirror to check for the umpteenth time Susan's presence in the back seat. He talked at ease with his brother Danilo, who was sitting in the passenger seat with a woolen hat, and equally happy explaining the political history of the country to Susan, who followed him with the interest of a foreign journalist.

The landscape became an endless horizon of vast and green grasslands, like a big spinach cake being crossed by a white Volkswagen. Inside, Susan and Danilo were now talking about music. Exhibiting samples of select humor that only he had brought out in the family, Danilo made fun of her musical taste. Although Mr. Suescún's eyes did not leave the road, he was keenly following everything that was happening around him. He tried to participate in the conversation with an intervention on the *bambuco* but did not

find space. *Hey, Susan, hear this, this is music*, said Danilo, as his bony, brown fingers placed a CD into the player. Through the mirror, Mr. Suescún managed to enjoy the wide smile with which Susan responded to his brother. He realized that his own lips had also loosened and he felt like an idiot, but still he continued to smile under the ancient sounds of Marin Marais.

The highway split in two and they took the narrowest road to Puerto Estrella; the passengers quieted down. They passed through a hamlet where they sold tangerines on both sides of the road and then an eternal row of identical stores emerged where they sold ice cream and bathing suits, and from the ceilings of all hung floats and colored plastic balls. Mr. Suescún slowed down to stop at the inn where he always had lunch with Socorro. He managed to recognize the cook surrounded by his dogs, stoking the fire in the oven with a straw fan, and he managed to savor the tender slices of pig meat. However, he did not want to betray his wife, even if she was dead. He started again before the sleepy gaze of Danilo, who seemed to understand everything that was passing through his brother's mind, although he did not utter a word either. It was such a respectful relationship that at times it seemed non-existent, a connection as deep as it was invisible. Without taking his eyes off the window, Danilo wished his brother's melancholy was left behind like the dogs barking after the wheels of the car.



The Volkswagen went into stony land fringed by bushes, and then Mr. Suescún turned the window handle and the hot wind slid gracefully into everyone's lungs. The weeds, more and more obstinate, erased the path until there was no other trail, except the one remaining in the memory of the owner. Concerned for the health of his brother, Mr. Suescún tried to avoid the hollows and stones of the road until they finally arrived at the place where it seemed to have been the garden of the farm, now completely full of bushes, and at the area of the pool made of stone slabs and half filled with waters covered by a green and gelatinous mud. In the background was the white house covered with patches of mold, which seemed to have served as a guerrilla hideout, or to be inhabited by ghosts. But the travelers had witnessed too much in life to be moved by first impressions. From inside the car only emanated the great anticipation of getting out and stretching the bodies.

Eva, a hen and a dog the color and shape of a tobacco greeted them. The midday sun hit hard. Mr. Suescún shook Eva's nervous hand and then helped his brother out of the car: it was like holding the body of an Old Year, just as weak as the one they made and burned every year when Anita was little. However, he could not help noticing, as so many other times, the beauty in his younger brother's features; as beautiful as finished, as different from him. Then he took out the suitcases, the blankets and the briefcase with Danilo's medications. Susan disembarked with makeup, took her backpack and, massaging her thighs, walked with the others towards the house.

Eva and some chicken marched in the lead, opening the doors of the house and rooms. Inside, the air felt cold and rough. Anita's room, according to the housekeeper, was the only one where they had managed to win the war against the black butterflies. It was painted pale pink, and had a small window and ceilings so high that the three beds with white linens looked like those in a hospital for crazy old people, Mr. Suescún thought.

Danilo lay down on the center bed and leaned his head against the wall. Mr. Suescún opened the green suitcase and had the feeling that his existence had been reduced to what was there. His footsteps began to crawl through the room, going back and forth from the moldy closet where he started to organize his shirts, one by one, like if they were his life. Susan kicked off her shoes, revealing her plump white ankles, stretched out on the bed in the side corner and closed her eyes. In a few minutes she was asleep, breathing hard, and Mr. Suescún took the opportunity to look at her.

The three of them took a nap under the lullaby of the river that came through the window. Susan opened her eyes and, as in sync, Mr. Suescún's and Danilo's also opened. She put on her tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses while the four eyes of the brothers followed her movements with deplorable concealment. Carelessly she spilled the contents of her backpack on the bed, *here, here it is*, she said as she chose a bathing suit and hung it around her neck, *and this too*, she

said taking a glass jar with mossy bits of marijuana inside. She stood up and walked to the bathroom, *for after lunch*, she said, shaking the jar in front of each of the brothers. Danilo responded with a bad-boy smile and Mr. Suescún with a naive-boy smile, but when he saw her complacent expression reflected in the closet mirror, he went out to refresh his mind. He needed to regain the sanity personified in Socorro.

He toured the muddy floors of the old hacienda, checking at every step the deterioration of the property and his health, and the impossibility of recovering either of the two. How strange it was to walk over those family lands, knowing that a woman with messy hair, very different from the short and straight of his wife, had awakened feelings in him that he believed were dead; dead and dissected even years before Socorro's death. It seemed impossible to be stepping on that usual rotten and fertile layer of vegetation and at the same time knowing that his brother was dying, that his daughter, with whom until recently he walked hand in hand through those furrows now lived thousands of miles away and slept with a man who looked like a bear. His college days seemed to belong on another planet. The overgrown bushes made it difficult for him to walk. It was painfully overwhelming to admit that his life, as he had known it, was over.

When he returned to the room, he wet his face and hair and changed his clothes. He also helped Danilo put on a cooler shirt, and together they went out into the garden.

Susan, in a beige bathing suit about the same color as the freckles on her skin, was lying on a wooden extension chair. Next to her, under the shade of a flowered oak, was a table that she had arranged with silverware and plates, and the yellow flowers of the tree in the center. Mr. Suescún pulled some rickety chairs up to the table. Now he was wearing linen trousers and monk's sandals between which his yellowish fingernails were peeking out. He sat down slowly, intrigued by the grace and self-confidence with which Susan and Danilo resumed the conversation. Eva appeared with a tray of cooked bananas, fried eggs, and a mountain of rice. They had not eaten anything since leaving the city in the morning; Mr. Suescún filled his plate while admiring Susan's skin. Between bites, he watched the freckles that ran down her shoulders and chest until they merged with her bathing suit and got lost down there. Then he remembered the snow-capped mountains of Banff, which she had mentioned, and had the urge to touch those mountains. She realized it and smiled at him without taking her eyes off him. Something stirred in his heart and again between his pants. Moments passed of the kind that later one wishes to have lived longer, but that are usually fleeting for being fantastic; and these ones, in particular, ended suddenly because of Mr. Suescún's inability to bear that smile. His hands clapped involuntarily on the table, the egg yolks trembled, and he had to excuse himself from the table.

He entered the fields of the farm, and walked and walked among endless trails trying to understand his feelings. The sun was falling, and with it the obsession to recover the past. The air of the last hours

of the day cleared his mind until he had the sharp conviction that Susan was for him.

The darkness that now covered the grasslands had never been clearer. With muddy footsteps that were manly again, he walked back.

The house, like a distant blur, could hardly be seen because the moon had not risen that night. Only the dim light of some candles lit the tree under which the voices of his brother and Susan could be heard. Her soft laughter, in the distance, heralded the end of his tense days. Mr. Suescún smiled and quickened his step. Almost drunk from the optimistic air that entered his lungs, he let out a short laugh; his life made sense again. He managed to perceive Susan's warmth as he took her by the waist and hugged her, and he managed to hear his own voice proposing that she stay with him.

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The truth hit him suddenly, in an unexpected second. Susan and Danilo whispered; they were lying on some blankets, wrapped in others, their bodies together, their arms intertwined. A cloud of smoke like a fright lengthening and contracting covered their naked bodies. The red flames of the candles danced against the blackness of the night, making the withered skins appear the color of wine; a disgusting scene for Mr. Suescún, who stopped like a perplexed bull in front of his matador, with the amber toenails a few steps away from them. He observed the hands of his brother, who were gently going

over Susan's neck, while he felt a cruel thrust biting his guts. In the distance, a high-pitched whistle was heard by Mr. Suescún, like that of a booing crowd. But after a while of standing motionless in front of the couple, Mr. Suescún understood that the stridency was coming from somewhere within his own body.

Danilo raised his head and with a smile that did not belong to him, said: *Where were you?* Susan also looked at him, leaned on her elbows and revealing a pink nipple. She took the cigarette that was on the rice tray, smoked slowly and blew out smoke while waiting for the answer.

Vanquished in front of them, drooling and panting, Mr. Suescún did not even have breath to flee from his defeat.