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THE BOY WITH all the dreadlocks had two lines of business: cars and the patio trade. He had been working his turf—the sidewalk along the front of *La Nación*'s building—for a few months now. Longer than most of his predecessors. The car thing was the usual, but he did it with politeness, even delicacy, and these were not qualities his victims would expect from one of his kind. So he surprised them, and it paid off. He had a plastic bucket without a handle, a squeegee, and, tucked into the waistband of his cutoffs, three large rags: a dirty one, a less dirty one, and a clean one.

The routine goes something like this:

A car pulls into a space. The boy does not go to it immediately, because he knows that if drivers see him before getting out, they will have crucial seconds to harden their hearts. He waits until the driver has locked the doors, then appears magically. And smiles.

“Good day, señor. You like me to wash your windshield?”

Sometimes — quite often, actually — the driver will hesitate, maybe shrug, dig a small coin out of his pocket. The victims who do this are the ones who look at him.

“Thank you, señor. I’ll watch your car for you, too. All part of the service.”

More often, the response to the boy’s offer is either non-existent or obscenely dismissive. But his smile does not waver.

“Okay, señor. No problem. But maybe you like me to keep an eye on the car for you?”

The driver looks at him, hard. Jabs a thumb up toward the heavily built uniformed man patrolling the patio. “That guy up there’s watching my car. And he’s watching you, too.”

The smile achieves an even greater brilliance. “You mean the doorman? My friend Rubén? Yeah, Rubén’s cool. He’s sound. Just not so quick on his feet as he used to be, you know?”

The boy’s technique gets him about four results out of ten, and he calculates that this works out at an average of twenty-two centavos a hit. He is surprisingly good at arithmetic, considering the fact that the only way he could ever have been in school was through a window after dark.

Some days he gets his ass kicked, and this was one of those days. The car was a black Porsche 911. (The boy knew the makes and models of cars, even though he couldn’t read them.) The driver was a white guy with his hair shaved

close to his skull so it looked like the shadow of a bat or something. The boy had known right away that it was a no-hope hit, but went for it anyway because it was his solid rule that you do not choose; you go for everything. The man had ignored him, getting a briefcase out of the car. Checking his cell, then putting it away in the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

“Okay, señor. No problem. But maybe you like me to keep an eye on the car for you?”

The man with shadow hair sighed, drumming his fingers on the Porsche’s gleaming roof. Then he turned with surprising swiftness and kicked the boy. Who had somehow been expecting it and had flinched. The kick caught him high on the right buttock just below the hip. He found himself sitting on the sidewalk, his leg numb and useless. The man loomed over him, his eyes hot with anger that seemed inappropriate to the situation.

“Listen,” he said. “I’m sick and tired of wherever I go there’s some street rat hustling me, and I don’t need it, okay? Now, lemme make this plain to you, kid. I come back to this car and anything — *anything* — has happened to it, I’ll find you and pulp your stupid hairy head. Is there any part of that you don’t understand?”

“No, señor.”

“Good. Now get the hell away from my Porsche.”

The boy scooted himself backward across the sidewalk, soaking the seat of his shorts in the water that had slopped from his bucket. When he was sure the man had gone, he

lifted his face and gazed up at the concrete and glass perspective of the office building narrowing into the late afternoon sky. He felt dizzy, maybe because he was hungry.

Seven floors above the street, Paul Faustino was checking the text of an article that would appear on the front page of the next day's edition of *La Nación*.

EXCLUSIVE: OTELLO WILL SIGN FOR RIALTO

by Paul Faustino

The gossip mills and rumor factories can shut down. I can now reveal that Otello, the man who led this country to victory in this year's Copa América, will be a Rialto player within the week. The terms of the transfer were agreed between Rialto and Espirito Santo yesterday after Spain's Real Madrid withdrew from the contest for the striker. The deal is unlikely to be on a cash-only basis—Espirito has stolidly refused to lower its evaluation of Otello from fifty million—but details will not be disclosed prior to a formal announcement at a press conference scheduled for Thursday. My information is, however, that Rialto's popular young forward, Luis Montano, will move to Espirito to offset the fee, thus adding to the controversy that will inevitably attend this affair. We can expect a bitter reaction, not only from Espirito fans but also from many in the North who will see Otello's move south to the capital as an act of betrayal.

Faustino leaned back in his chair and massaged his lower lip with his thumb and forefinger. This was a big, big story. It would warm the cockles of his editor's heart—if she possessed such an organ. It would earn him a nice juicy bonus, too. He could not quite believe his luck, actually, so there was an uneasy edge to his glee.

Talk of Otello leaving Espirito had begun well before the Copa América. And in recent days the hum of rumor and speculation had swollen into the voice of a vast beehive. The tabloids and sports channels had been obsessed with it. Lacking any real information, they'd put out opinionated babble. Chaff. Faustino had been a journalist long enough to know that very often there is, in fact, smoke without fire. But he too had been pretty sure that Otello would make a move. He had to; Espirito was not a good enough club for him. They'd had another lousy season, ending up fourth from the bottom of the league, despite Otello's twenty-three goals. Which meant that once again they wouldn't be playing in the Copa Libertadores. Which in turn meant that Otello, the national captain, would go yet another season without playing an international club game. Ridiculous, obviously.

Faustino was not a gambling man, but he'd have put money on Otello joining one of the big European clubs: Manchester United, say, or Barcelona. But a move south, to Rialto? No way. Of all clubs, not Rialto.

And then, this morning, the call from Otello's agent, Diego Mendosa, a man Faustino hardly knew.

Still scrawling notes, Faustino had said, “Why me, Señor Mendoza?”

“Pardon?”

“I was wondering why you chose to break the news to me, exclusively.”

“Because you are widely respected, Paul. All these rumors have caused my client a great deal of stress, as you can imagine. Only someone with your reputation can lay them to rest.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Also, perhaps I would like to give the finger to certain other newspapers that have pissed me off.”

Faustino had laughed at that. “Yeah. Well, that’s honest.”

Afterward he’d wondered about that. In Faustino’s vocabulary, *honest* and *agent* were not words that normally went around holding hands.

He went back to his article.

Born in the North, and famously proud of his African heritage, Otello has done much to silence (in stadiums, at least) the racist jeers directed at black northerners. His charity work, which includes food banks and soccer academies in the slums, has given him a status, a respect, way beyond the usual scope of soccer stars. All of this, along with his much-proclaimed loyalty to the North—he has played for only two clubs in his career, both of them north of the Río de Oro—means that his transfer will have a seismic effect.

Faustino wondered if the word *seismic* was a bit over the top and decided that it wasn't. He'd been at countless Rialto games and seen their supporters jeeringly wave fifty-dollar bills at the visiting fans, especially when the game was against a team from the North. Heard the call-and-response jokes.

"What do you call a Northerner with a roof over his head?"

"A burglar!"

Then there was the fact that the owners and directors of Rialto were hate figures in the North. Members of the New Conservative government, like Vice President Lazar and that evil little sod Hernán Gallego. Multimillionaires like what's-his-name, the supermarket guy, Goldmann. And Nestor Brabanta, of course. And this was the club that the North's great hero had decided to join. My God, he was in for a rough time.

Seismic, then. Nice word, anyway.

Faustino skimmed the rest of his piece. He'd soft-pedaled on the political/social/racial issues. Mendosa had asked him to, and you don't bite the hand that feeds you. First rule of journalism.

I for one am glad that he has faced reality and joined a club that will put him center stage, where he belongs. Let us welcome him to our city and pray that the inevitable storms in the North soon abate.

“You can be a sanctimonious jerk sometimes,” Faustino told himself, and deleted the last sentence. He was dying for a smoke.

La Nación

To: Vittorio Maragall, Editorial

From: Paul Faustino

Hola, Vito —

Attached is copy for tomorrow’s Otello piece. It’s up to you, but I suggest we go with a crop of the photo we used on the front page July 25, Otello holding up the cup with all that red and yellow glitter stuff in the background.

I’ll be at La Poma until about 9. If you get away in time, maybe I’ll grant you the honor of buying me a drink.

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1.2

FAUSTINO WAVED A salute to Marta at the reception desk and clacked across the marble-paved lobby. Approaching the doors, he slowed to a more cautious pace. *Doors* was not, in fact, an appropriate word for the vast, complex, and untrustworthy arrangement of clear glass that baffled him at least four times a day. Beyond it, in plain sight, was the outside world, yet he knew from painful experience that reaching it was not a straightforward matter. There were central revolving doors, twice the height of any normal person (presumably because one never knew when a giant or a man on stilts might be expected), but Faustino absolutely refused to use them. For one thing, the evil genius who'd designed them had incorporated a variable speed mechanism, which meant that you never knew whether to adopt a mincing shuffle or run like hell. Usually you had to do both, but because of the cunning randomizing device, you never knew when to switch from

one to the other, so even at ten in the morning you looked like a stumbling drunk on a treadmill. For another thing, Faustino was borderline claustrophobic and feared the doors coming to a complete halt and trapping him inside.

Off to the right and left there were conventional doors with enormous brass handles. However, you never knew whether or not these would respond to their inbuilt sensors and open automatically. If they didn't, you could pull on them and sometimes they would open. At other times, you had to push. Just to make sure that nobody got complacent, only one functioned at any particular moment. There was no way of knowing which. You could enter through the right-hand door in the morning and find that the left-hand one was the only way out in the afternoon. A few months earlier, Faustino had entered the building, checked his mail, and tried to leave by the same door fifteen minutes later. He had suffered what the paramedic had described as a "mild concussion." Not to mention a hemorrhage of dignity.

So Faustino had developed an exit strategy. He would come to a halt a few paces from the glass wall and search his pockets for his car keys and cigarettes. Eventually he'd be spotted by Rubén, who would come to his rescue. On this particular evening, the doorman hauled the right-hand door open from the outside while Faustino stood fumbling in his jacket facing the left-hand one.

Gratefully liberated, Faustino walked out onto the wide, raised patio that fronted the building. From it, flights of steps led down to the sidewalk. On it, there was a short

avenue of ornamental trees imprisoned in brutish concrete troughs, and in the shade of these trees were two rows of stainless-steel benches. It was part of Rubén's job to shoo off any weary passerby who might have the impertinence to seek rest there. Clearly no one who *walked* along the Avenida San Cristóbal could have any legitimate reason to visit the offices of the country's leading newspaper.

Rather than go directly to his car, Faustino sat and lit a cigarette. This was because two very attractive secretaries from the accounting department were sitting on the bench opposite. Also, he had recently—and very reluctantly—traded in his beloved Jaguar for a top-of-the-line Toyota Celica and was making an effort not to impregnate the new upholstery with tobacco smoke. He was distracted by a call from the street.

“‘Ola, Maestro! Wha’s happenin’?”

A wild head and wide smile showed above the level of the patio.

Faustino returned the smile. It was impossible not to. It was a smile that would melt an icicle from a hundred yards. He figured it must have taken a good deal of practice to perfect it, since sunny dispositions weren't exactly natural among street kids.

Faustino had never been one of the boy's car victims because, as the paper's senior sportswriter, he had a reserved (and bitterly envied) space in *La Nación's* underground garage, which sprouted CCTV cameras the way forest trees grow bromeliads. No, they'd met because of the

errands side of the kid's business. A couple of months back, Faustino had been coming down the steps from the patio, fishing a cigarette pack out of his pocket. The pack had been empty, and Faustino had crushed it in his hand and loudly uttered a curse. As if in response, the kid had appeared right in front of him, like a genie, just as the streetlights came on.

"What kind d'you smoke, Maestro?"

"What?"

"What kind of cigarettes d'you smoke?"

Faustino had squinted at him. The boy wasn't carrying a bag.

"Why? Are you selling?"

The smile. "No, no, Maestro. But your car's down there, and the kiosk's up there." Pointing up toward the traffic lights on the *avenida*. "I'll fetch 'em for you."

After a moment or two Faustino had said, "What's all this 'Maestro' stuff?"

The smile had faltered, then died. "Sorry, señor. I thought that was your name. That's what the others call you."

"What others?"

A shrug. "I dunno."

There had been a sort of standoff.

Then Faustino had said, "Yeah, well. D'you know what *ironic* means?"

"No, señor."

"Okay. Never mind. If I give you five dollars to get me two packs of Presidente filters, will you come back with them?"

The smile had returned like lights after a power outage.
“Sure.”

“Any reason I should believe you?”

The boy had gestured toward the street. “I got a reputation to keep up.”

Faustino had been charmed by that, even though he considered himself immune to charm. And the kid had come back with the cigarettes in less than five minutes and handed over the change.

“Keep it.”

“Many thanks, señor.”

“So what’s your name?”

“Bush.”

“Bush? That because you were found under one? Or because your mother’s a big fan of former American presidents who own oil wells?”

“Nah.” The boy had wagged his head while pointing at it with the forefingers of both hands. The crazy mane of dreadlocks bounced and flew. “It’s ’cause I look like one. I was born with a whole bunch of hair and it jus’ kept on goin’.”

Faustino had studied the kid while fumbling with the damn cellophane wrapping on the cigarettes. The Rasta hair, the longish Spanish face, the wide Indian cheekbones, the African coloring, the narrow nose from God knows where—Arabia, maybe—the good teeth. Some flecks of green in the eyes. Not tall; skinny but well muscled. The genes that had produced him had tumbled through the centuries like balls in the lotto machine and come up with a

winning number. He was a good-looking boy. But someone else had walked off with the money and all the luck.

“How old are you, Bush?”

Another shrug. “Seventeen?”

Well, yeah. Any street kid who could get away with it would say that. Because the dreaded Child Protection Order didn’t apply to anyone over sixteen. He might have been fourteen, fifteen — who knows?

But for whatever reason, Faustino thereafter bought his *Presidentes* via the kid. Add the change together, and over a week it came to about a dollar twenty. Enough for two chicken chili fajitas if you got them from one of the places down by the bus station.

The way Bush combined his two businesses impressed Faustino. The kid had eyes in the back of his head. Come the lunch break, he’d be cleaning the gunk and insects off a windshield while somehow monitoring the *Nación* staff who came out onto the patio for a bit of sun or a smoke or to say stuff they couldn’t get away with in the terrible open-plan Big Brother offices they worked in. And if Maya from advertising just couldn’t hack her low-fat diet for one more minute, somehow Bush would know it and catch her eye, and in no time at all he’d have covered the four blocks to and from the deli and be delivering her a toasted ham and cheese. Fantastic, baby. Keep the change. Twenty centavos. When the cold-drinks machine in the lobby broke down, which was at least once a month, he would be on a roll. Ten centavos per Coke, average, on a crate of twelve.

Faustino also admired the way Bush respected Rubén, the way he allowed the doorman to maintain his authority. When Rubén was watching the trees and the steps on the right-hand side of the patio, Bush would do business from behind the trees on the left. And when Rubén was strolling down the left-hand side of the patio, Bush would do business from behind the trees on the right. This spared kindly Rubén the embarrassment of evicting a street kid from the sacred patio, upon which the street kid should not have been allowed to trespass in the first place. It also meant that Bush's customers appreciated Rubén's way of doing things, and that was good for Rubén. Because after all, doormen, like street kids, were not exactly irreplaceable.

So now Faustino was not displeased to be interrupted in his contemplation of secretaries' legs by Bush's wide white grin.

"Hey, Bush. How're you doing? Good day? Bad day?"

The kid rocked his right hand horizontally. "So-so. You know a big shave-head guy drives a Porsche, a black one?"

"Nope, can't say I do. Why?"

"He kicked my ass an' spilled half a my water. I thought if you knew him, you might do him a bad turn."

"I'll look out for him."

"Thank you, Maestro. Anything you'd like from the kiosk?"

From the way he said it, you'd think the kiosk was a limitless trove of rare delights.

"I'm fine right now," Faustino said. He stood and stubbed out the cigarette in one of the concrete troughs, checked his watch. Because the *Nación* building was perched on one of the city's five hills, it had more than its fair share of sky, and already, at the horizon, where the petrified forest of high-rises dissolved into vagueness, that sky had taken on a peculiar tan color. In less than half an hour the traffic, already thickening, would be a crawling, honking nightmare. Time to go. He descended to the sidewalk and Bush kept pace with him as he walked to the parking garage entrance.

"So, is Otello gonna sign for Rialto, or what?"

Faustino tapped the side of his nose. "You'll have to wait till tomorrow's paper comes out."

Bush rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Hmm. Remind me, Maestro, how much a copy cost?"

"Forty-five."

The boy shook his head and let out his breath to express sad incredulity. Faustino grinned and found a fifty in his pocket. He flipped it into the air. Bush twirled and caught it behind his back. When he raised his hand, the coin had vanished. Faustino slapped his palm against the boy's.

"Ciao, Bush. Watch your step."

"And you, Maestro. See ya."

Faustino was still smiling as he went down the gloomily lit ramp. There was no way the kid could read, but what the hell.