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Kilómetro 11

Translated by Cameron Hicks Baumgartner

ABSTRACT: Mempo Giardinelli is an author and journalist from the Chaco province of Argentina. He fled to Mexico in 1976, at the beginning of Argentina's Dirty War, his life endangered by writings the junta considered subversive. "Kilómetro 11," published in 1999, takes place a few years after Argentina's Dirty War has ended. It confronts the traumatic political persecution of that era while demonstrating the victims' enduring humanity through startlingly merciful confrontations with their former jailers.

KEYWORDS: Mempo Giardinelli, Argentina, dirty war, guerra sucia, dictatorship

Introduction

Mempo Giardinelli is an author and journalist from the Chaco province of Argentina. He fled to Mexico in 1976, at the beginning of Argentina's Dirty War, his life endangered by writings the junta considered subversive. He remained in exile for seven years. His work includes essays, a dozen novels, and several short-story collections, and he has received many notable awards, including the 1983 Mexican National Book Award for his novel *Sultry Moon (Luna caliente)*. He now resides again in his native Resistencia, Argentina, where he directs the Mempo Giardinelli Foundation and writes for the newspaper *Página/12*.

Cameron Baumgartner is a literary translator and fiction writer from Charlottesville, Virginia, where she graduated from the University of Virginia with a BA in linguistics and cognitive science. Her original fiction has received the second-place prize in the 2017 Fralin Museum of Art Writer's Eye competition. She has been working with Mr. Giardinelli since January on a series of stories about the Dirty War to serve as cautionary tales for the current global political climate. Specifically, these stories demonstrate the dehumanizing violence of a political movement built upon scapegoating. "Kilómetro 11," published in 1999, is the first in the series to appear in English. It takes place a few years after Argentina's Dirty War has ended, and confronts the traumatic political persecution of that era while demonstrating the victims' enduring humanity through startlingly merciful confrontations with their former jailers.

For Miguel Angel Molfino

"I say it's Segovia," says Achilles, blinking, fidgeting, while he elbows López El Negro. "The one with the dark glasses. I'd swear on my life that's Corporal Segovia."

El Negro stares hard at the guy playing the accordion, frowning, and it's as if a series of old movies are playing behind his eyes, impossible to forget.

Scene: A dance at a house in Barrio España. A group of friends have gotten together to celebrate Achilles' birthday. They are all former prisoners who were in Unit 7[1] together during the dictatorship. A few years have passed since then, and they've made it a tradition to get together with their families whenever there's a birthday. This time they decided to do it in style, with beef on the grill for an Argentine *asado,* with a roast suckling pig for starters and all the wine and beer they could find in town. El Moncho did well last week in bingo, so they hired a live band for the party, too.

In the shade of a grape arbor, the quartet plucks chamamés and polkas, tangos and paso dobles. When Achilles turns his attention to the accordionist with the black sunglasses, they're playing "Kilómetro 11."

"Yep, sure is," says López El Negro, and he gestures to Jacinto.

Jacinto nods as if to say, I recognize him too.

Without speaking to each other, communicating only through glances, one by one they all recognize Corporal Segovia.

Dark-skinned and thick-lipped, with small eyes that blink constantly, he used to play "Kilómetro 11" while they were being tortured. His superiors in the military made him sing and play the accordion in order to drown out the prisoners' screams.

Some of the men tell their wives about the discovery, and they all get up to form a circle around the accordion player. By the end of the song, no one is dancing. And before the quartet can start on another, Luis asks him, the guy with the dark glasses, to play "Kilómetro 11" again.

The party has ended and the evening lurches, like the sunset is slowing down, or the evening hasn't yet decided if it wants to turn into night. There is a rhythmic density to the air, as if the hearts of everyone present marched in unison and only a single, enormous heart could be heard beating.

When the chamamé ends for the second time, no one claps. Everyone at the party, some with drink in hand, others with their hands in their pockets, or clasped around their women, stand in a circle around the quartet, and the courtyard looks like a Colosseum in which the roles of beast and victim have been reversed.

When the last chord sounds, El Moncho says:

"Again," addressing himself not to the four musicians, but to the accordionist alone. "Play it again."

"But we've played it twice already," he replies with a feigned smile, suddenly nervous, like someone who has just realized he's gone where he shouldn't.

"Yes, and you'll play it again."

The guy looks like he's about to say something, but it seems that El Moncho's firm, commanding tone has made him realize who the men surrounding him are.

"One time for each of us, Segovia," seconds Skinny Martínez.

The accordion, after a hoarse and faltering breath that seems a metaphor for the breathing of its player, timidly begins the same chamamé. After a few beats the guitar begins to play, and then the double bass and the concertina join in.

But Achilles raises his hand and calls for silence.

"Just him," he says.

And after a silence as long as a heartbreak, the accordion plays *da capo* and the notes produce a "Kilómetro 11" that is sharp and shrill, but recognizable.

Everyone is watching the man, including his bandmates. And the man perspires: From his temples fall two fat drops that linger on his cheeks like slow, minute rivers in search of a source. His fingers press the keys, mechanically, unenthusiastically; perhaps without knowing what they're pressing. The accordion opens and closes on the man's right knee, wheezing and moaning, like a punctured lung, and he wears a ribbon on his lapel in the blue and white of the Argentine flag.

When the song is over, the man removes his hands from the keys. He flexes his fingers, kneading the air, and can't decide what to do. He doesn't know what to do; not even what to say.

"Take off the sunglasses," orders Miguel. "Take them off and keep playing."

The man, slowly, with his right hand, takes off the black sunglasses and drops them to the ground beside his chair. His eyes are fixed on the top of the bellows. He does not look at his audience; he can't look at them. He's looking down, or avoiding the glare of the spotlight, the way you avoid looking up on a sunny day.

"'Kilómetro 11.' Again," Halfbreed's wife says.

The guy keeps looking down.

"Go on, play. Play, you son of a bitch," Luis, Miguel, and some of the women say.

Achilles shakes his head, as if to say, No, don't insult him, we don't need that here.

And the man plays on: "Kilómetro 11."

A minute later, as the arpeggios of the chorus ring out, they hear the weeping of Tito's wife, who is holding onto him, and the two of them holding the son they had while Tito was inside. All three, weeping. Tito's nose is running. Achilles goes over and hugs him.

Then it's El Moncho's turn.

For each man, "Kilómetro 11" evokes a different set of memories, because emotion always erupts off beat.

And when the guy on the accordion starts in on the eighth or ninth "Kilómetro 11," it's Miguel who weeps. Aguirre explains to his wife, whispering, that Miguel was the one who came up with the idea of going to buy a piece of candy every day from Leiva Longhi. Each one of them would go and buy a candy while looking him right in the eyes. And that was it. They paid for it, of course. The man didn't want to charge them. He'd say, No, just take it, but they paid for the candy. Always the one piece of candy. Nothing else, not even cigarettes. One piece of candy. Any flavor, but just one, and looking Leiva Longhi right in the eyes. A parade of former prisoners who, every afternoon, stood in front of the kiosk, for three years or so, from '83 to '87, every single man, not a one of them skipping a single day, and just so they could say to him: "One candy. Give me one candy," and so on every afternoon until Leiva Longhi died, of cancer.

And now, the accordionist looks like he's cramping up. In the last few renditions he has botched several notes. He is playing with his eyes closed, but he slips up in his exhaustion.

No one has moved. The circle around him is nearly perfect, with an equidistance instinctively measured. There's no escape. And his fellow musicians are petrified. They've each gone stiff, like children playing freeze tag. The atmosphere, weighed down with bitterness, that reigns over the evening has sculpted them from granite.

"We're not doing this for revenge," says Deafy Pérez, while Segovia goes on to the tenth "Kilómetro 11." And Deafy begins to recount in a loud voice, superimposed on the music, the day he went to the clinic to pay a visit to Camilo Evans, the urologist, three months after he got out of prison, in the summer of '84. Camilo was one of the prison doctors during the dictatorship. And once, when they had tortured Deafy so much that he began peeing blood, Camilo told him, laughing, that it was nothing, and said to him, "This is happening to you because of how much you jerk off." That's why, when he got out, the first thing Deafy did was go to the clinic to see him, but under a different name. Camilo, at first, didn't recognize him. When Deafy told him who he was he went pale and leaned back abruptly in his chair and started saying that he'd only been following orders, please forgive me, don't hurt me. Deafy said no, I didn't come to hurt you, don't be scared; I just want you to look me in the eye while I tell you that you're a piece of shit and a coward.

"Same thing with this son of a bitch who won't even look at us," says Achilles. "How many are we up to?"

"This one makes fourteen," replies El Negro. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, I've been counting," says Pitín. "And there's fourteen of us."

"Stop, Segovia," says Achilles.

And the accordion goes silent. For a few seconds more they hear, floating in the air, the agonized breathing of the bellows.

The man drops his hands to his sides. They seem longer than before; they hang almost to the ground.

"Now look up. Look at us, and scram," orders Miguel.

But the man doesn't raise his head. He breathes deeply, almost panting, asthmatic like his accordion.

There is a long, very heavy silence, barely broken by the fussing of Margoza's baby, who has lost his pacifier. It's back in his mouth soon enough.

The man closes his instrument and does up the buttons that secure it. Then he grips it with both hands, like an offering, and rises slowly to his feet. At no time does his gaze leave the toes of his shoes. But once he is standing, they all see that he's not just sweating, but his eyes are watering, too. He makes a pinched face just like a child, and it's as if, suddenly, being upright changes the course of his waters—because first he blubbers, and then he cries, but noiselessly.

And that's when Achilles, elbowing López El Negro again, says:

"It almost doesn't seem true, but he's human after all, this son of a bitch. Look how he cries."

"Make him go away," says one of the women.

And the man, Corporal Segovia, goes away.

ENDNOTE

[1] Translator's note: Unit 7 is a prison near the Argentine city of Resistencia, in the northern province of Chaco. During Argentina's Dirty War, political prisoners were kidnapped to secret detention centers operated by the military, where they were tortured extensively before being sent to prisons such as Unit 7.