

We was just hanging around waiting for 'em, they each knew their time and day, but one thing I'll tell you, it was all nice and relaxed, we could have a good slow smoke, and every now and then old López would bring round coffee and we'd have a break, discuss what was new, almost always the same things, the boss' visit, any changes higher up, the horses' form out at San Isidro. Of course, they weren't to know that we were waiting for 'em—and we sure were—everything had to be done without any fuss, don't worry, you just get on with it, that's what the boss said, and he'd repeat it every now and again just in case anyone forgot, take it nice and easy, all in all it was dead simple, if something went wrong nobody was going to take it out on us, the buck stopped with the high-ups and the boss was a straight bloke, don't worry lads, if there's any trouble it's me who takes the flak round here, but one thing, don't you go and get me the wrong punter, first you check so there's no foul-up, and then you go right ahead.

To be honest, they never caused us trouble, the boss had picked offices which were just the job so there wouldn't be no scrum, and we dealt with 'em one by one, textbook stuff, just as long as we needed. If you wanted courtesy you'd come to the right place, mate, the boss said so again and again and it was true, everything timed so smoothly that we put IBM to shame, well greased our machine was, no bleedin' rush, no move up there, make more room. Plenty of time for our coffees and the favorites in Sunday's races, and the boss was the first to come round for a tip 'cos Skinny Bianchetti's were always dead certs. So it was the same routine every day, we'd arrive with the papers, old López would bring round the first coffee, and a bit later they'd begin to turn up for the procedure. That's what it said in the summons, a procedure that concerns you, and there we were just waiting for 'em. And I'll tell you one thing, even though it's on yellowed paper, a summons always looks real serious; that's why María Elena had examined it over and over again at home with its green stamp round the illegible signature, and with her time and place. When she was on the bus she took it out of her handbag again and wound her watch just to be on the safe side. She'd been summoned to an office in Calle Maza, it was odd that there was a ministry there, but her sister had said that they were setting up offices all over the place because the ministry buildings were becoming too small for them, and as soon as she got off the bus

she realized that it must be true; the area was nothing special, just three or four-story buildings and in particular a lot of shops and even some of the few trees still left in that part of the city.

“At least it’ll have a flag flying outside,” María Elena thought as she drew near to the block which contained street-numbers in the seven hundreds, perhaps it was like those embassies which were usually in residential areas but you could spot some way off by some old multi-colored flag hanging from a balcony. Although the street number was quite clear in the summons, she was surprised not to see the national flag and she stopped for a moment on the corner (it was too early and she was in no hurry) and for no particular reason she asked the man at the newspaper kiosk whether the Department was on that block.

“Of course,” the man said, “there, half-way down the block, but, look, why don’t you keep me company for a bit before you go in, it’s lonely here on my own.”

“On my way back,” replied María Elena with a smile as she walked slowly away checking the yellowed paper yet again. There were hardly any people or traffic about, just a cat in front of a grocer’s and a fat woman coming out of a doorway with a little girl. The few cars she could see were parked up by the Department, practically all of them with somebody sitting at the wheel reading a newspaper or smoking. The entrance was narrow, like all those in the block, and at the far end of a hall with decorated tiles there was a staircase; the plaque on the door was dirty and no more imposing than a doctor’s or dentist’s, with some of its words masked by a piece of paper stuck over the bottom half. There was no lift; very odd having to climb the stairs right up to the third floor after that important-looking letter with its green stamp, signature, and everything.

The door on the third floor was shut and there was no bell or any door-plate to be seen. María Elena tried the handle and it opened silently; the tobacco smoke hit her before she noticed the corridor’s greenish decorated tiles and the people sitting on benches on either side. There were only a few waiting, but what with all that smoke and such a narrow corridor the two elderly ladies, the bald gentleman, and the young lad with the green tie all seemed to be touching knees. Just as she opened the door María Elena caught the tail-end of something one of the ladies had been saying; they must have been killing time talking

but, as usual, they suddenly fell silent and stared at the latest arrival and, as usual again, María Elena blushed, feeling really silly, and could only manage a quiet hello and stood by the door until the lad signaled that there was an empty bench next to him. Just as she sat down, thanking him, the door at the other end of the corridor half-opened, letting out a ginger-haired man who made his way between the others’ knees without bothering to excuse himself. The clerk held the door open with his foot, waiting until one of the two ladies stood up with some difficulty and, making her apologies, threaded her way between María Elena and the bald man; the door out to the stairs and the one into the office shut almost simultaneously, and the rest of them started chatting again and stretched a little on the creaking benches.

As usual, all of them harped on about some pet subject, the bald man about how slow the bureaucratic procedure was, if the first time’s like this God knows what it’s going to be like later, more than half an hour hanging around, and in the end what for, perhaps just a couple of questions and goodbye, at any rate I suppose so.

“Don’t you believe it,” said the lad with the green tie, “it’s my second time and I can tell you that it isn’t that quick, what with them typing everything out and then you maybe go and forget some date, that sort of thing, well, in the end it’s not so quick.”

The bald gentleman and the elderly lady were all ears because it was clearly their first time, just like for María Elena, although she didn’t really feel she could join in the conversation. The bald man wanted to know how long it was between the first and second time they summoned you and the lad explained that in his case it had been about three days. María Elena wanted to ask why two summonses, and felt the blood rise to her cheeks again and hoped that somebody would say something to her and give her the confidence to speak, let her join in, stop being the newcomer. The elderly lady had taken out a little bottle, smelling-salts probably, and was sniffing it between sighs. P’raps all that smoke was making her feel poorly, the lad offered to put out his cigarette and the bald man said, well, what can you expect, that corridor was a disgrace, they’d put out their cigarettes if she felt unwell, but the lady said no, she was a little tired, that’s all, she’d soon get over it, at home her husband and children were chain-smokers, I hardly even notice now. María Elena, who had also

felt like lighting up, saw that the two men were extinguishing their cigarettes, the lad stubbing his out on the sole of his shoe, having to hang around waiting always makes you smoke too much, last time had been worse because there were seven or eight people in front of him, and in the end you couldn't see your hand in front of your face for smoke in the corridor.

"It's like a waiting-room, life is," said the bald gentleman, carefully grinding out his cigarette with his shoe and examining his hands as if he didn't know what to do with them now; the elderly lady sighed a yes born of long years of agreeing, and put away her little bottle just as the door at the end of the corridor opened and the other lady came out with that look all the others envied, and an almost sympathetic goodbye when she got to the exit. So it didn't take so long after all, María Elena thought, three people in front of her, say three-quarters of an hour, of course the procedure might be longer with some people, the lad had already been once and he'd said so. But when the bald gentleman went into the office, María Elena plucked up courage to ask so she'd be sure, and the lad thought for a while and then said that the first time some of them had been in there ages and others not, you never could tell. The elderly lady pointed out that that other lady had come out almost straight away, but the ginger-headed man had taken an eternity.

"Just as well there are only a few of us left," María Elena said, "these places are so depressing."

"You've got to be philosophical about it," the lad said, "remember that you'll have to come back, so you'd better take it easy. The first time I came there was nobody to talk to, there were a whole lot of us but, I don't know, we didn't seem to hit it off, while the time's gone quickly ever since I've been here today because we've been talking about this and that."

María Elena was happy to carry on chatting with him and the lady, she hardly noticed the time going by, and then the bald man came out and the lady stood up surprisingly quickly for somebody her age, the poor creature wanted to get the procedure over quickly.

"Well, now it's just us," the lad said. "I'm dying for a fag; do you mind if I smoke? It's just that the lady seemed quite unwell ..."

"I could do with one too."

She took the cigarette he offered and they exchanged names and where they worked, it made them feel better to have a talk and forget the corridor with its silence that sometimes seemed to weigh down on them as if the streets and the people out there were a long way off. María Elena had also lived in Floresta as a child, but now she lived in Constitución. Carlos didn't like Floresta, he preferred the western side of the city, cleaner air, trees... If he had his way he'd live in Villa del Parque, perhaps when he got married he'd rent a flat there, his fiancée's father had promised to help, he was well connected and maybe he'd fix something up.

"I don't know why, but I get the feeling I'm going to spend the rest of my life living in Constitución," María Elena said. "Anyway, it's not so bad. And if one day..."

She saw the door open at the end of the corridor and gave the lad a rather startled look as he got up with a smile to her, see how time flew when you were chatting, the lady gave them a friendly goodbye, she looked so pleased to be off, everybody seemed younger and more sprightly when they came out, as if a weight had been taken off their shoulders, the procedure over and done with, one formality fewer, and outside the street, the cafés where maybe they'd have a drink or a cup of tea to make them feel the waiting-room and the form-filling really were behind them. Now that María Elena was on her own, time would go more slowly, but at this rate Carlos would be out quite soon, still maybe he'd take longer than the others because this was his second time and who knows what procedure he'd have to go through.

At first she almost didn't understand when she saw the door open and the man looked across and nodded to her to come in. She thought, so that's it, Carlos was having to stay a little longer filling in forms and, in the meantime, they'd attend to her. She said hello to the man and went into the office; she'd scarcely crossed the threshold when somebody else pointed her to a seat in front of a black desk. There were several people working in the office, all of them men, but she couldn't see Carlos. Across the desk a sickly-looking man was scrutinizing a form; he put out his hand without looking up and María Elena didn't realize at first that he wanted the summons, she suddenly grasped what he was after and began looking for it rather flustered, murmuring apologies, she took two or three things out of her bag before she found the yellowed paper.

“Start filling this in,” said the man handing her a form. “Nice and clear and in block capitals.”

It was the usual silly nonsense, first name, surname, age, sex, address. Between two answers María Elena had a feeling that something was wrong, something she couldn't put her finger on. It wasn't the form, the blanks were easy to fill in, it was something unconnected with her, something that was missing or out of place. She stopped writing and glanced round, she saw the other tables where the men sat working or talking amongst themselves, the grimy walls with their notices and photos, the two windows, the door she'd come in through, the office's only door. *Profession*, and beside it a dotted line; she filled it in without thinking. The office's only door, but Carlos wasn't in there. *Length of time in this employment*. Nice and clear and in block capitals.

When she signed the form at the bottom she became aware that the clerk was giving her a look as if to say she'd taken too long filling it in. He glanced through the sheet of paper, couldn't spot any problems, and put it in a file. The rest was questions, some of them pointless because she'd already answered them on the form, but also about her family, any changes of address in the last few years, her insurance policies, whether she travelled frequently and where to, if she had taken out a passport or intended to. Nobody seemed to be very concerned what she said in reply, and, anyway, the man didn't write anything down. Then he suddenly told María Elena that she could go but should come back in three days' time at eleven in the morning; there was no need for a written summons, but she'd better be there.

“Yes, sir,” María Elena said as she stood up, “eleven o'clock on Thursday, then.”

“Good-day,” the man said without looking up.

There was nobody in the corridor, and walking along it was just like it had been for all the others, a rush to get away, breathing a sigh of relief, a longing to be out in the street and leave all that business behind her. María Elena opened the door out and, as she began to go down the stairs, her mind turned again to Carlos, it was odd that Carlos hadn't come out like the others. It was odd because the office had only one door, well, it was impossible, of course, maybe she hadn't looked properly, the clerk had opened the door for her to go in and Carlos hadn't come out at the same time, he hadn't left before she

went in as all the others had, the ginger-haired man, the ladies, all except Carlos.

The sun beat down on the pavement, María Elena was conscious of the noise and feel of the street; she took a few steps and came to halt standing by a tree in a spot where there were no cars parked. She looked back towards the doorway into the building and thought she would wait a while to see Carlos come out. It was just impossible Carlos wouldn't come out, everybody had once they'd completed the procedure. She thought that perhaps he was taking a long time because he was the only one who had come back a second time; who knows, maybe that was why. It seemed so strange not to have seen him in the office, but perhaps the notices hid another door and it had just escaped her, all the same it was odd because everybody had come out along the corridor like she had, all those who were there for the first time had come out along the corridor.

Before she set off again (she'd been waiting a while and couldn't go on for ever) she remembered she'd have to return on Thursday. Maybe things would be different then and they'd get her to leave by some other door even though she didn't know where or why. She didn't, of course, but we knew all right, we'd be waiting for her and all the others, having a leisurely smoke and a chat while old López made us another of the many coffees that morning.