I was afraid to read this book.

My father died after a course of illness very similar to Javier Miranda’s when I was just finishing my training as a pediatrician. It was an experience that I am reluctant to relive, if I can help it. The premise of The Sickness is made quite obvious on the back cover, and you don’t have to read more than a page or two to realize that Alberto Barrera Tyszka writes powerfully affecting prose and is unlikely to pull any punches, either by design or accident, as he escorts his reader through the nightmare emotional and physical landscapes inhabited by very sick people and the people who love them. This is a great book by a great writer, I thought after only a few pages. But I wanted to put it in a lead box and forget about it.

I did set it aside for a long time, but I could not forget about it, and I spirited it away from its containment more and more frequently, for longer and longer stretches,
feeling somehow as if I were peeking through my fingers at the words. Eventually, I dropped my hands from my mind’s eye, gave myself over to Tyszka, and finished the novel. Then I read it again in a single sitting.

I could not resist this story or avoid it for the same reasons I have never been able to fully resist or avoid the story of my father’s illness: the fundamental gravities of guilt and regret and grief are inescapable while we are alive. They lock us into orbits that can look a lot like our old lives—the ones we lived before the sickness or the accident, before the death—but aren’t the same. Much more importantly, I could not resist this story because it illustrates—perhaps it’s more accurate to say it contains—a set of energies that work in opposition to guilt, regret, and grief. That is to say, I thought this was going to be one of the most depressing books I have ever read, but it was exactly the opposite.

That’s not to say it isn’t a sad book, or a brutal one—it’s both. But it travels into dark, sad, brutal places and brings back the report that life is very much worth living because people are very much worth loving. This is the news that sickness itself sometimes brings, to the sick person, to his or her lovers and families and caretakers, often in a way that feels too late: the sick and dying person discovers or remembers too late whom they loved or who loved them. *The Sickness* reminds us that it is both always and never too late to discover or remember such things: if health is rendered into a state of waiting for sickness to manifest, then we all, sick and healthy alike, are given a mandate to grasp at everything and everyone.
precious in life. That’s why this book is the very opposite of depressing. Depression maintains very convincingly that everything—every person and every experience—is worthless and without meaning. Its opposite convinces you that everything and everyone matters—that you matter, that your life and the people in it matter.

I am a congenitally dispirited person. When trying to describe my usual spiritual and emotional torpor, I’ll sometimes ask people to imagine a cruel experiment in which Christopher Robin’s dysthymic donkey friend Eeyore is forced to watch twelve consecutive episodes of *Law and Order: SVU* and then made to eat a quaalude. I tell you this now to try to make you understand that I am not a person ordinarily susceptible to attempts—by priests, poets, therapists, or social workers, by movies or music or books, by Smurfs or unicorns or drag queens—to convince me that everything is actually all right, that life is good, that people are worth the various risks of knowing and loving them.

But this book convinced me of all those things—the goodness of life, the worthiness of people, the ultimate value of communication—without even appearing to try. If it had appeared to try to make such an argument, to say directly such things as *Other people can help you in your suffering* or *You can help them in theirs*, I would have balked. But then, we all should probably resist when such things are merely said. These are just platitudes, empty forms that can inspire rage and resentment in the suffering or doubtful person to whom they’re addressed. *You cannot say such things to me*, I think, in a way that is
barely articulated or acknowledged but very powerfully felt, whenever I hear someone state that people suffer for a reason, that illness and grief make us stronger, or—worst of all—that it’s all part of some plan, that our own and others’ suffering is a thing we’ll understand one day as having been necessary. You can’t say such things to me, I think, because I am a congenitally dispirited person genetically protected from sunny platitudes, or because I am a pediatric oncologist, or because Eeyore is my mascot. But really you can’t say these things to me for the same reason that you can’t say them to anyone: I’m a human being, and I know better.

*The Sickness* does not offer up platitudes. It destroys them. Yet it provides a reassurance that is believable and real, and it is believable and real because it is not spoken but shown, because we are invited and compelled to live it within the story. We may very well suffer for no reason, and gain no strength from our troubles except the final invulnerability of oblivion; the best we may ever do one day to understand our suffering is to try to forget about it; there may be no plans to our lives except for retroactive fictions—*The Sickness* does not deny any of this. It may even insist upon it all. But in writing so honestly about illness and suffering, Tyszka throws a light on everything that is not sickness or suffering—the sickness illuminates its own remedy, which has nothing necessarily to do with modern medicine. This is a book that is ultimately about whether or not we are all alone—in our lives, in our suffering, in this world. And it is a book that ultimately makes us less alone, something for which we
should all be very grateful to the author. You should read this book if you are congenitally dispirited, like me. But you should also read this book if you are congenitally full of good spirits, if you have never been sick or felt afflicted by the universe, if you have never loved someone who was ill, who suffered, who died. Even if bouncy Tigger is your mascot and spirit guide, you should read it, because one day we are all going to need to have heard its message, and to try to remember it.

—CHRIS ADRIAN
“Are the results in yet?”

No sooner are the words out of his mouth than he regrets having spoken them. Andrés Miranda wishes he could catch the question in midair and send it back where it came from, hide it away again beneath a silence. But he can’t, it’s too late. Now all Andrés has is the chief radiologist’s face, his lips a knot in the middle of his mouth, his dark eyes like two stains, as he offers Andrés a smile of strained sympathy and hands him a large brown envelope. The radiologist says nothing, but his very expression is a judgment: multiple lesions suggestive of a metastatic disease, for example. That, more or less, is what the knotted lips are saying. Medical people rarely use adjectives. They don’t need to.

“Are the results of the CT scan in as well?”

The radiologist shakes his head and shifts his gaze to the corridor.

“I was told they were being sent direct to you.”
Andrés feels strangely embarrassed, as if both of them were making a tremendous effort not to upset the fragile balance of the moment. He thanks his colleague and makes his way back to his office. No one has told him as much, he hasn’t even seen the X-rays, he hasn’t been shown the results, and yet he knows that his father has cancer.

Why do we find it so hard to accept that life is pure chance? That is the question Miguel always asks before any operation. There they all are wearing green gowns, gloves, and surgical masks; the white light of the operating room seems to float on the cold air-conditioned air. And then Miguel picks up a scalpel, looks at Andrés, and asks: “Why do we find it so hard to accept that life is pure chance?” Some of the nurses dislike this as a prelude to an operation. Perhaps they realize that it’s not exactly a good way to start, almost a prior justification in case anything should go wrong. Andrés is sure this isn’t so, for he knows Miguel well; they’ve been friends since they were students. There’s no cynicism in that question. It seems, rather, an expression of self-compassion, a kindly prayer; a way of recognizing the limits of medicine in the face of nature’s infinite power or, which comes to the same thing, the limits of medicine in the face of illness’s infinite power.

As soon as he goes into his office, as soon as he closes the door, he begins to tremble. He feels as if, suddenly, his body were breathing differently, making different sounds and movements, as if he bore inside him some helpless, stumbling creature, as if he were giving birth to a disaster.
He hurriedly makes his way over to the chair behind the desk and sits down. He’s still holding the envelope. Inside are two chest X-rays. Bluish photos, harsh, sharp transparencies. His father’s body transformed into a blurred drawing in which, however, death is all too cruelly clear. Andrés feels afraid, even though this isn’t a new fear: it’s been there for years, stalking him. It must be the same fear which, for no reason and yet so often, leaps out at him from his own shadow. It’s the anxiety that weighs on his chest some nights, preventing him from sleeping. We’re probably all born with such a fear, which is as vague as it is overwhelming. It wanders about inside us, not knowing where to go, but never leaving us. It prepares itself, trains itself, waiting for the right moment to appear. It’s an omen, a voice that doesn’t quite know yet what it has to tell us. But it’s there, an indecipherable, incomprehensible sound, an insistent drip-drip, an alarm call. He’s been hearing it for years, running away from it, trying to frighten it off, but never succeeding. Now, that anxiety has taken on a shape: the face of the radiologist, with its evasive, resigned expression. Andrés has seen it too many times before. He himself must have worn the same expression on more than one occasion. It’s the illustration that accompanies a bad diagnosis, the first installment of an expression of condolence. Is he ready for this? He’s not sure.

The phone rings. It’s Karina, his secretary. She tells him his father is on the line again, asking if he can speak to him.

“Am I so ill that you don’t even want to talk to me?”
This is his father’s opening line. Delivered in a jokey tone, of course. Andrés recognizes the nervousness that lies behind. It’s a classic strategy. Many patients opt to use it, positioning themselves on a thin line where everything is simultaneously half jest and half serious; they try to act normally, when, in fact, they’re terrified and haven’t stopped thinking, not even for a second, about the possible result of their tests. They’ve spent hours pursued by the fear of mortal illnesses; they’ve felt an odd twinge in every movement they make; they’ve seen suspicious blotches where before they saw only skin. Then they go to the doctor, trying to look strangely natural: they smile, but appear to be on the verge of tears. They ask questions like the one his father has just asked.

“I didn’t phone you earlier because I’ve only just seen the results of your tests,” Andrés says.

“And?”

“In principle, everything’s fine,” he says, touching the sealed edge of the envelope.

“In principle? What the hell does that mean, Andrés?”

“Calm down, Dad. I’m telling you that you’re fine.’

“You’re telling me that, in principle, I’m fine: that’s rather different.”

Andrés is perfectly familiar with this stage too. Generally speaking, patients need to squeeze every word, wringing out its most precise meaning, with every nuance washed away. They want to clear up any doubts, even about punctuation. A patient always suspects that he’s not being told the truth or at least not the whole truth, that some information is being withheld. That’s why they
insist on delving desperately into everything, even lan-
guage. In this case, though, his father is right. Andrés said
“in principle” because he hasn’t yet looked at the X-rays.
Why doesn’t he take them out now, why doesn’t he open
the envelope and study them? What is stopping him from
looking at those results?

The radiologist’s face hangs like a balloon in his of-
lice. Hospital corridors tend to be full of such balloons.
They drift slowly through the air, identical, tenuous bits
of plastic on which are painted frowning brows, grave
mouths, sober looks: all the outward signs of helpless
resignation. It’s a ceremony, a clinical protocol. Hos-
pitals are places through which one passes: temples to
farewells, monuments to partings.

“I said ‘in principle’ because I still don’t have all the
results. The ones I’ve just been given are fine.”

“Which means that . . .”

“That there’s nothing to worry about, Dad,” Andrés
says, interrupting him, already embarrassed. He can’t
stand lying for any length of time. “Go out for a walk,
have a coffee somewhere with your friends. Everything’s
fine, really.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

There is a brief silence. A tense, unbearable pause.
Andrés wants to hang up. He can sense that his father is
still uncertain, still in doubt. He can imagine him in his
apartment, sitting on the arm of the green sofa beside the
phone, gripping the receiver, thinking. Suddenly, Andrés
feels as if he were poised above a chasm of nothingness,
a precipitous drop. They’re suspended for a moment not in silence, but in the void, until:

“You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?” His father is speaking from his very bones, in the harsh but intimate voice with which all bones speak. “Andrés,” he goes on, “if there was something seriously wrong with me, you wouldn’t ever hide it from me, would you?”

Andrés has a hedgehog on his tongue. His throat fills with pineapple rind. Despite himself, his eyes well up with tears. He’s afraid his voice might fail him. He makes a huge effort to speak.

“I would never deceive you, Dad,” he says at last, with as much conviction as he can manage.

“That’s all I wanted to hear. Thank you.”

Dear Dr. Miranda,

I trust you will remember me. It wasn’t easy to get hold of your e-mail address. If you knew what I’ve been through to find it! But that’s another story. What matters is that I’m here now, writing to you. Not that I like the fact. I’ve never felt comfortable writing. It’s not me, it doesn’t feel right, I don’t know where to put the words or what to say. But in a way, circumstances are forcing me to write. I have no other option.

I need to see you urgently, Doctor. I’m desperate. For three months now, something very strange and mysterious has been going on. When I call your office, I’m told you’re not in or can’t come to the phone. If I ask to make an appoint-
ment, the person at the other end says “No,” she can’t do that. And she won’t explain why either. I’m sure you know nothing about this situation, nothing at all. You would never treat me like that, but if that’s the case, who is responsible for all this? And why?

This is the reason for my letter, Doctor. It’s the only way I have now of asking you for an appointment. My situation remains the same, with my health deteriorating by the day. Reply directly to this address. Please, trust no one else. I need to see you as soon as possible.

Thank you for your attention and, as I say, I’m here, waiting for your reply.

Ernesto Durán

Blood is a terrible gossip, it tells everyone everything, as any laboratory technician knows. Hidden inside that dark fluid, stored away in little tubes, lie murky melodramas, characters brought low, or sordid stories on the run from the law. When his father fainted, Andrés insisted on him having a whole battery of blood tests. His father protested. He tried to make light of the matter. He preferred the term “dizzy spell” to “fainting fit,” and insisted on this almost to the point of absurdity.

“It was just a dizzy spell,” he kept repeating, blaming it on the humidity, the summer heat.

It was, according to him, the fault of the climate rather than an indication of some physical ailment. But the truth of the matter is, he had collapsed on the floor
like a sack of potatoes in front of the woman who lived in apartment 3B. They’d been talking about something or other—neither of them could remember what—when suddenly his father collapsed, and the neighbor started screaming hysterically.

“I thought he’d died. He was so pale! Almost blue! I didn’t want to touch him because I was afraid he might already be cold! I didn’t know what to do! That’s why I started screaming!” says the neighbor.

A few seconds later, his father, once he’d recovered consciousness, had tried to calm her down and reassure her that everything was fine, that nothing very grave had happened. Perhaps he had told her, too, that it was just a dizzy spell. Nevertheless, that same afternoon, the neighbor phoned Andrés to let him know what had happened.

“The old busybody!” his father grumbled when Andrés arrived to pick him up and drive him to the hospital.

While the nurse was taking the blood samples, Andrés suddenly noticed that his father had grown smaller. It had never occurred to him before to notice his size, but seeing his father there, arm outstretched, eyes fixed on the ceiling, so as not to have to look at the needle, it seemed to him that his father had become shorter, had lost height. Javier Miranda is a fairly tall man, almost five foot ten. Tall and slim, with a rather athletic build. He always walks very erect, as if his body didn’t weigh on him at all. Despite his age and the fact that he’s gone gray, he looks cheerful and healthy. His curly hair has won out over any incipient baldness. His skin is slightly tanned, the color of light clay. His eyes are brown too.
He’s never smoked, only drinks occasionally, goes for a walk every morning in the park—Parque Los Caobos—avoids fatty foods, has fruit and muesli for breakfast, and every night eats seven raw chickpeas as a way of combating cholesterol. “What went wrong?” he seemed to be asking himself. He had sidestepped time rather successfully. Everything had been going relatively well until, one afternoon, that inexplicable fainting fit had stopped him in his tracks. It was that brief wavering of his equilibrium that had brought him to this place and abruptly transformed him into this weak, wounded, small—yes, smaller—person. The words “Sickness is the mother of modesty” came unbidden into Andrés’s mind. They appear in Robert Burton’s The Anatomy of Melancholy, published in 1621. It’s required reading in the first term of medical school. The quote bothered him though. It struck him as not so much sad as stupid; behind it lay the desire to make of sickness a virtue. He looked at his father again. Isn’t sickness a humiliation rather than a virtue?

Up until now, his father’s health had only ever succumbed to the occasional common cold, and a brief urinary infection two years ago, but that was all. He enjoyed enviably good health and, so far, there had been no other worrying signs. Andrés, however, had a bad feeling. The whole situation produced in him a peculiar sense of apprehension. With no evidence on which to base that feeling, he thought for the first time that the worst could happen, that it might already be happening. It irritated him to feel hijacked by a mere hunch, to be taken hostage
by something as irrational and unscientific as a bad vibe. His father glanced across at him. Andrés didn’t know what to say. It suddenly struck him as pathetic that the fate of a sixty-nine-year-old man could be summed up in just four tubes of dark fluid, O Rh positive. What would his father be feeling at that moment? Resigned? Ready to accept that he was reaching a preordained destiny, that this was a natural conclusion to his life; that now he was entering a stage when people would stick needles in him and when he would inhabit a world dominated by the aseptic smell of laboratories? He again looked hard at his father and was filled by a frightening sense that it was no longer his father meekly putting up with being pricked, touched, and bled, it was just a body. Something apart. An older, more vulnerable body in which his father’s spirit writhed in protest. Spirit was an odd word. Andrés hadn’t used it in ages. He felt that he was using it now for the first time in years.

The two of them. For almost as long as he can remember, it has been just the two of them. His mother died when he was ten. For almost as long as he can remember, Andrés has been the only son of a widower, of a strong man capable of struggling with terrible grief, with great loss. His mother died in an air crash, on a flight from Caracas to Cumaná. The plane was airborne for only a matter of minutes before it nosedived. It was a national tragedy. The work of the rescue team was hard and, for the most part, fruitless. A special room was set up in the Hospital de La Guaira, where the victims’ families could
try to identify what little was left: a foot, half a bracelet, the crown of a tooth . . . His father returned from the hospital that night, looking drawn and ashen. He talked for a while in the kitchen with the other members of the family, then picked up his son and left. Andrés already knew what had happened. Despite his aunts’ attempts to protect him, he had managed to elude them and, in secret, had watched the events on television. When his father, his eyes red from crying, went to enormous lengths to soften the news he had to give him and told him that Mama had gone away on a long, long journey, a journey from which she wouldn’t come back, Andrés, still confused, fearful, and bewildered, simply asked if his mother had been on the plane that had fallen into the sea. His father looked at him uncertainly, then said, “Yes,” and put his arms around him. Andrés can’t be sure now, but he thinks they cried together then.

For a long time, Andrés used to dream about his mother. It was the same dream over and over, with very few variations: the plane was at the bottom of the sea, not like a plane that has crashed, but like a sunken ship; it was quite intact, sleeping among the seaweed and the fish and the shadows, which, like cobwebs, danced across the dull sand. Inside the plane, a large oxygen bubble had formed on the ceiling. It was a very fragile bubble that was slowly shrinking. His mother was trying to swim along with her head inside the bubble so that she could breathe. She appeared to be the sole survivor, there was no one else, only fish of different colors and sizes that cruised past her with an air of extraordinary, almost
bored serenity. It was odd, but in the dream, his mother was wearing a swimsuit and shoes—an orange two-piece swimsuit and a pair of black leather moccasins.

As time passed, his mother grew more desperate. Several times she struck the ceiling of the plane, making a distant, metallic sound, like a tin can being dragged through the sea. She peered out through a window onto nothing, only dark water, a liquid penumbra no eye could penetrate. The sea had no memory, it destroyed everything too quickly for that. Then his mother, beside herself, almost suffocating, beat harder on the ceiling of the plane and cried out: “Andrés! Andrés! I’m alive! Come and get me out of here!”

When he woke, he had usually wet himself and was trembling. Even when he got out of bed, he still felt himself to be in the grip of the dream. It would take him almost a minute to get out of that plane and escape from the bottom of the sea, and stop hearing his mother’s cries. His father proved a tireless warrior on his behalf. He patiently helped Andrés to defend himself against those enemies. He was always there, on the edge of the dream, waiting for him.

These memories crowded into his mind as he watched his father in the examining room. Did he perhaps have the same presentiment? Andrés would doubtless prefer him not to. When you’re nearly seventy, he thought, a bad omen is like a gunshot. At that age, there are no more deadlines, there is only the present.

The nurse removed the needle and handed Javier Miranda a piece of cotton wool soaked in hydrogen perox-
ide. He pressed down hard on the place where the needle had gone in and glanced at his son as if pleading for a truce, as if asking if they couldn’t just get up and leave. Are the monsters of old age as terrible as those that assail us when we’re children? What do you dream about when you’re sixty-nine? What nightmares recur most often? Perhaps this is what his father dreams about: he’s in an examining room, in the bowels of a hospital, surrounded by chemicals, sharp implements, gauze, and strangers all repellently dressed in white; yes, he’s in the bowels of a hospital, looking for a tiny bubble of air, so that he can breathe, so that he can shout: “Andrés! Andrés! Get me out of here! Save me!”

While Andrés was driving his father home, he tried to avoid talking about the subject. It wasn’t easy. His father kept muttering bitterly to himself. He claimed that the tests were a complete waste of time, that the only thing they would show was that his cholesterol levels were slightly raised, if that. Certainly nothing more, he insisted. Andrés dropped him off at the door to his apartment building. As he was driving away, he could still see his father in the rearview mirror. There had been a time when he had considered having his father move in with them, but had feared that family life might become a nightmare for everyone. Mariana got on reasonably well with his father, and his children had a lot of fun with him, but those were only sporadic encounters, occasional trips to the movies or to a park, to a restaurant or to a baseball game. Day-to-day life is a different matter, a far more demanding exercise. And yet, at that moment, while he could
still see him, a diminutive figure in the rearview mirror, he again considered the possibility. Sooner or later, if you were an only child, you had to pay for your exclusivity. His father had no one else. If, instead of standing in the corridor, talking to the neighbor, he had been alone in his apartment, it could have been really serious. For a second, Andrés sees the scene with hideous clarity: his father goes into the kitchen to turn off the gas under the coffeepot, he bends over, loses consciousness, and collapses. In the same movement, in the inertia of the fall, his head drops forward, propelled by the weight of his body. It strikes the edge of the stove, then the handle on the oven and, finally, the tiled floor. The green veins in his forehead are swollen and tense. His nose is broken. His right eye looks slightly sunken and there is blood on his right cheekbone. There’s more blood above his right eyebrow. He could have broken a rib: perhaps, when he comes to, he won’t be able to move or call anyone. The water is boiling. Soon there will be the smell of burnt coffee.

That night, Andrés would have liked to make love with Mariana. Not for any special reason and without even feeling any particular desire for her, but he needed to have sex. It was a need, a furious longing to be on top of her, penetrating her, without thinking about anything, without saying anything, just following the urgent pistoning of hips, the rise and fall. But he didn’t know how to approach her. He wasn’t in the mood to seduce her and felt ashamed to say what he really wanted. Women don’t understand that for men sex is sometimes a sport, one they can practice at any time, at any moment, and
with anyone. Masculinity is too basic, too simple. The love ethic tends to be feminine.

“Don’t you think you’re blowing things up out of all proportion?” Mariana asked before they went to sleep. “You don’t even know the results of the tests yet. Why are you getting so upset?”

Andrés reminds her that his father has become rather forgetful lately. Every detail now begins to take on a new importance for him, a new value.

“But even you commented on it recently,” he says. “We were here, having a meal.”

“Yes, true. But that’s normal, isn’t it? Even I forget things sometimes, so why shouldn’t your father? Don’t exaggerate. Why insist on thinking the worst?”

He doesn’t know why, he certainly didn’t know then. But he had that incomprehensible, unpleasant feeling, as if some fatal, imminent event were circling him, the intuition that what had happened to his father that day was the first sign of something much more serious and definitive: Burkitt’s lymphoma, for example, or a cutaneous mucinous carcinoma, or an asymptomatic plasma cell neoplasm. Andrés knows perfectly well that nature translates those words in the most pitiless way. What terrifies him most is imagining his father suffering. His father hunched and screaming, racked with pain and weeping. Pain is the most terrible of the body’s languages. A grammar of screams. A prolonged howl.

He left Mariana reading in bed and went out onto the balcony. It annoyed him that he should start believing in presentiments. A doctor with a PhD in immunology
and almost twenty years’ professional experience has no right to have presentiments. Susan Sontag said that there are two kingdoms: sickness and health. Human beings often have to move between the two. Andrés has often thought that in the middle, on the frontier of those two geographies, stand the doctors, checking passports, asking questions, weighing things up. They may have their suspicions, but they need proof. It’s a job that requires evidence. A doctor sees erythema, hematoma, cells, enzymes, proteic variables; a doctor reads symptoms and takes no notice of vibes, hunches, fleeting images.

The sound of the telephone ringing was like an aluminum finger scraping the air. He answered at once. It was the laboratory. The test results he had asked for as a matter of urgency were ready. While he listened to the figures, noting them down on a piece of paper, he continued to feel the same anxiety. It was as if a voracious, insatiable animal had taken up residence inside him and was still there, panting, even when he could see that all the results were normal. Just as his father had said, the only thing wrong was a slightly raised cholesterol level. Everything else was fine, within the usual range. He glanced at his watch and decided that it wasn’t too late to call his father. Not that he was in celebratory mood. The wretched presentiment refused to go away, it wasn’t satisfied. There is always some piece of gossip over which the blood has no control. He picked up the phone and rang the hospital again. He booked an appointment first thing the next morning to take some chest X-rays and do a CT scan. He didn’t want to leave any room for doubt.
Why does he insist on thinking the worst?  
Because sometimes the worst happens.

It wasn’t easy to persuade his father to go back to the hospital. Andrés almost had to drag him there. He immediately got upset and went on the defensive. Andrés showed him the blood-test results and assured him that everything was fine, but his father reacted as anyone else would have:

“If everything’s fine, why are you making me go for more tests?”

There was no alternative. Andrés had to sit down and tell him straight: yes, the blood tests were fine, but he wanted to be absolutely sure, that’s why he thought his father should have a couple of X-rays and an MRI scan. It was part of a general examination, a routine exercise, simply to confirm that everything was alright.

“Trust me,” he said. “Believe me.”

His father sighed deeply and only then agreed to be taken to the hospital’s radiology unit.

His father comes out into the corridor and eyes him gloomily. His naked body is covered only by one of those skimpy gowns that tie at the back. Andrés almost runs over to him.

“There, that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

His father doesn’t answer. He doesn’t even look at him now. He could at least grunt a response.

“Now there’s just the MRI and the CT scan,” murmurs Andrés, about to propel his father down the corridor.